

AS A MAN SOWS

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ON

AS A MAN SOWS

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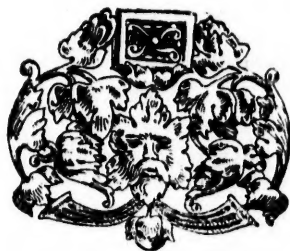
AS A MAN SOWS

BY

WILLIAM WESTALL

AUTHOR OF

'THE PHANTOM CITY,' 'WITH THE RED EAGLE,' ETC.



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AS A MAN SOWS

CHAPTER I.

A BIG SWINDLE.

HALF a century ago, and for many years thereafter, no Liverpool firm was more highly esteemed at home or better known abroad than the firm of Berners Brothers. Their offices were in Water Street, their transactions for the most part financial, and mainly with the United States. They opened credits, bought and sold foreign bills, dealt in bullion, granted their acceptances against bills of lading and consignments of stock and other values, and so ample was their capital and so undoubted their credit, that even in periods of panic their paper was as easily melted as a bank-note.

In those days few American travellers sailed for Europe unsupplied with drafts on Berners Brothers, and for their accommodation the house set apart a room adjoining the principal office, handsomely furnished and well equipped with newspapers, writing materials, and spittoons.

For a day or two after the arrival of the New York packet—which mostly happened on a Saturday or a

Sunday—the room would be full, but towards the end of the week the number of daily callers and readers often dropped to a poor half-dozen, or even fewer, as befell on a certain summer morning in the forties, when three gentlemen tourists had the room to themselves. Two were writing letters. The third, who had adopted a careless and picturesque attitude, was deep in a newspaper. His white hair, parted in the middle, fell over his ears and impinged on the immense stock which enfolded his neck and concealed his chin. Gold-rimmed spectacles bridged his nose, and from his nether lip hung a long goatee. The general aspect of this gentleman was venerable and benign, albeit his unwrinkled face suggested that he was less aged than he seemed, and that he might have said, quoting Byron :

‘My hair is gray, but not with years ;
Nor grew it white
In a single night,
As men’s have grown from sudden fears.’

As he read, a brisk young fellow came in from the office and respectfully accosted him.

‘Here is the money you asked for, Mr. Dundas,’ said he—‘ten notes of five pounds each.’

‘I thank you, sir,’ returned the venerable gentleman, as he thrust the notes into his hip pocket. ‘That leaves to my credit how much?’

‘One hundred and sixty-seven pounds fifteen shillings,’ responded the clerk, glancing at a slip of paper which he held in his hand.

‘That will do for my own expenses. I am not a spendthrift traveller, but I am making large purchases of machinery at Manchester and elsewhere, and shall

require several thousands in the course of the next few days. How are New York City and Suburban Six per Cent. First Class Mortgage Bonds going ?

'That's not in my department, sir ; but I think they are uppish.'

'Because I brought a lot with me—about fifty thousand dollars' worth. My principals thought they would pan out better than sterling exchange. I suppose there is a market for them here ?'

'Oh, certainly. But I had better send Mr. Romaine to you. He is well posted up in stocks and shares—has charge of that department.'

Whereupon the clerk vanished into the general office, from which presently emerged Mr. Romaine, a dapper, sharp-featured, sharp-looking little man.

'Mr. Wolstenholme tells me you want some information about New York City and Suburban Six per Cents.,' said he. 'Suburban Sixes, we call 'em, for short.'

Mr. Dundas looked up from his paper.

'Mr. Wolstenholme! Ah, the young man who was here just now,' quoth he. 'Yes, what are they worth ?'

'The closing price yesterday was one hundred and three pounds fifteen shillings, and as the market is strong, I have no reason to suppose they will be any lower to-day.'

'For the five-hundred dollar bond you mean ?'

'Yes ; three and three-quarters premium.'

'That is better than I expected. Well, I think I shall sell. I suppose you could give me the name of a respectable broker ?'

'If you desire it, certainly. But we shall be glad to put the business through for you at the ordinary brokerage.'

'That is good enough for me. I have a hundred bonds, numbered'—referring to a memorandum book—'from 2,317 to 2,416.'

'With coupons attached, and negotiable without transfer?'

'Exactly. You may let them go at one hundred and three pounds fifteen shillings, and as much more as you can get.'

'Very well, sir.'

And then Mr. Romaine hesitated and smiled enigmatically.

'I know what you mean. You don't like to commit yourself to a sale without having the bonds in your possession; and quite right, too. Well, I'll fetch 'em. They are at my hotel, locked up in the landlord's fire-proof safe. But there is no hurry. I can leave them with you as I drive down to the landing-stage to-morrow. I'm going to the agricultural show at Chester. I shall stay there till Monday. It's a fine old place, I believe.'

'That will be quite in order, sir. Shall we sell for cash or the account?'

'Well, I think I would rather have cash, if it's all the same to you. That is the way in New York—payment on delivery.'

'You can have it so if you like. It merely makes a fractional difference in the price. By the way, are we to consider one hundred and three pounds fifteen shillings the least you will take?'

'No; I wouldn't quite say that. I leave it to you. I shall be quite satisfied if you get me the best price of the day. You see, I have come over to buy machinery, and, having no credit in this country, must pay cash with my orders.'

'Very good, sir; the proceeds shall be at your disposal any time after to-morrow.'

'Oh, I am not pressed. Next Wednesday will do quite well. I go to Manchester on that day, and will call for the money before I start.'

'It shall be ready for you, together with a statement of account; and I hope you will find that we have managed the business to your satisfaction.'

On which Mr. Romaine went his way, and Mr. Dundas buried himself in his newspaper once more, and so remained for another half-hour, when he rose from his chair smiling complacently, lighted a big cigar, and, stepping out of the office, wended his way up Water Street with a grave and dignified air which well beseeemed his snowy locks and broad-brimmed hat.

On the following morning he called at Berners' and left his bonds, and on the Wednesday he called and got his money, ten thousand two hundred and odd pounds, in crisp bank-notes. The account presented to him by Mr. Romaine was found correct to a penny, and he warmly thanked that gentleman for his courtesy, and complimented him on the celerity with which he had put the business through.

'If you ever come to New York,' said he, 'I hope you will look me up. I shall have great pleasure in showing you round. My address is David D. Dundas, 22, Charlton Street. . . . That small balance to my credit, a hundred and something—seventy-five, thank you—I shall leave in your hands until I return from Manchester, which I expect will be in a week or ten days or so. By the way, there is something else I wanted to ask you. I suppose Sharp, Roberts and Co. are a solvent house? I shall be quite right in paying

them beforehand to the extent of three or four thousand pounds? Highly respectable and eminently trustworthy. I thought so; thank you. You won't forget, now, if you should come to New York?—David D. Dundas, 22, Charlton Street. Good-day, my dear sir—good-day!’

‘Good-day, Mr. Dundas. I wish you a pleasant journey,’ said Romaine; and then to his friend Wolstenholme: ‘What a nice old fellow he is! I shall certainly look him up if I go to New York, and the house is pretty sure to send me there sooner or later. Charlton Street—22. I don’t think I shall forget. However, it’s just as well to make a note of it.’

Romaine was right in thinking he should not forget. He remembered that nice old gentleman, with his white hair and gold-rimmed spectacles and broad-brimmed hat, as long as he lived. Everybody in the office remembered him, and by the house he was kept in mind for many a year.

Some twenty days after Mr. David D. Dundas received those beautiful bank-notes and left Liverpool behind him, Romaine was summoned into Mr. Berners’ room.

‘The mail is just in, as I dare say you know, Mr. Romaine,’ said the chief. ‘Just look at that letter, will you?’

It was a letter from the New York branch, or, rather, the affiliated house (Barlow, Berners and Co.), to the effect that there was reason to believe that a great fraud had been committed in connection with ‘Suburban Sixes,’ and their correspondents were advised to have naught to do with them, either as buyers or lenders.

The facts were briefly these :

The bonds were printed in 'series' from elaborately engraved plates, which were kept in the company's safe, and handed to the printers only when further supplies were required, the printers, on their part, being supposed to exercise a strict supervision over the process of production, and deliver to the company every 'form' printed, perfect or imperfect. This they declared they had done ; but according to the company's statement, there was a serious discrepancy between the number of forms (or ' blanks ') of a certain series which they had received and the number the printers averred they had sent in, and owing to the carelessness of one of the company's clerks, the discrepancy was not discovered until the end of the month, being three weeks after the latest delivery.

Be that as it might—whether the forms had been stolen from the printer's premises or the company's offices—there was no question that blank bonds with a face value of half a million dollars, and wanting only dates, signatures, and seals to become negotiable, were missing, and probably in circulation ; for the sharpers who had planned and executed so bold a robbery were not likely to stick at such a trifle as forging signatures and making counterfeit stamps.

The police thought the swindle was the work of a ring, acting in collusion with some of the company's officers or the printer's employés, and strenuous efforts were being put forth to unravel the mystery and identify the delinquents, who on their part were doubtless making haste to get rid of their loot, for obvious reasons, in comparatively small amounts and at divers distant places at home and abroad—most probably

abroad. Meanwhile the market had gone all to pieces, dealings being strictly limited to such bonds as had been exhibited to the company and pronounced genuine.

'Well?' said the chief, when the clerk had done reading the letter.

'It looks like a big swindle, sir.'

'I had arrived at that conclusion by my own unaided efforts. We sold some of those Suburban Sixes the other day. Were they bogus or genuine? That is what I want to know.'

'Genuine, beyond a doubt, I should say. Mr. Dundas is the last man in the world to lend himself to a fraud. He is frank to a fault, and honesty is written in his face.'

'Appearances are sometimes deceptive, Mr. Romaine, and he may be a victim. Honesty is not always a match for roguery, I am sorry to say. Anyhow, we must have those bonds back, and return them to New York for inspection. The possibility of their being forgeries is undeniable, and if we allow a single day to elapse without offering to take them back, we shall be to blame. The repute of the house for honourable dealing is not a thing to be trifled with. See Shonks—they were sold through him, I think—explain the circumstances, and say that we are ready to take the bonds back at once, paying for them whatever we received. And we had better communicate with Mr. Dundas. Do you know his address?'

'No. He said he was going to Manchester to purchase machinery from Sharp, Roberts and Co., and others, and would be here again in about ten days.'

'Where was he staying?'

'At the Adelphi.'

'Well, when you are out, call there, and if he is not returned, and went away without leaving an address—which I should regard as a bad sign—write to Sharp, Roberts and Co., and ask whether they know where he is.'

Romaine went out and did his errands. The buyer of the bonds was only too glad to surrender them in exchange for Berners Brothers' cheque, and they were forthwith despatched to New York for verification.

Mr. Dundas had left no address at the Adelphi, nor had aught been heard of him since his departure. On this, Romaine applied to Sharp, Roberts and Co., whose answer was to the effect that the gentleman had not called at their office, and that they knew nothing of him—which, as Mr. Berners observed, and Romaine admitted, looked ominous.

'We are done,' said the chief grimly. 'Ten thousand pounds clean gone. It looks like an audacious swindle.'

'I fear it is,' assented Romaine, whose faith in his venerable friend was now as 'clean gone' as the ten thousand pounds. 'I should like to see that old villain in the dock. I understand now why he was so affable and confidential. It was to throw me off my guard. Had we not better put the police on his track at once, sir?'

'Yes; it would be as well to find out where he is gone, if we can. More we cannot do.'

'But you would surely have the hoary ruffian arrested, Mr. Berners?'

'On what grounds? As yet, though I have not the least doubt in my own mind that we have been done, it is merely a case of strong suspicion. We have nothing

to show that these are forged bonds, much less that Mr. David D. Dundas knew they were forged. Nevertheless, with a view to ulterior proceedings, it is desirable to ascertain whither he is gone; so go down to the police office, see someone in authority, and put the matter into the hands of a sharp detective.'

Mr. Romaine went at once, and was referred to Mr. Frost, a gentleman with shrewd gray eyes and a somewhat saturnine countenance, who was supposed to possess the quality of sharpness in a high degree.

When he had heard the facts, Mr. Frost shook his head dubiously.

'I don't think I can do you much good, Mr. Romaine,' said he. 'It is now nearly three weeks since this venerable party took his hook, and from what you say I don't think he is the sort to let the grass grow under his feet. He may be in America by this time. However, I will make a few inquiries, beginning at the Adelphi Hotel, and let you know the result later on.'

The following morning Mr. Frost called to make his report, which, with one significant exception, was as barren as he had feared. He had ascertained that, after receiving the proceeds of the sale of his bogus bonds, Mr. Dundas called at the Adelphi Hotel for his luggage, and went on in his cab to the Lime Street Station, where he would arrive in time to catch either of two trains, one of which was bound for Manchester, the other for London.

Frost interviewed the guards of both, neither of whom, however, remembered seeing anybody like Mr. Dundas on the day in question. But the mention of his white hair recalled to the memory of the Manchester

guard an incident which occurred about the same time. A platelayer had picked up a white wig on the six-foot way in the Edge Hill tunnel, and, as he believed, taken it to the lost property office. There Frost found it, and ascertained further that the article was brought in several hours after Dundas's supposed departure from Liverpool.

'From which you conclude——' asked Romaine.

'That his white hair was as great a fraud as his bonds. But here is the wig; judge for yourself'—taking it from his pocket.

'It is very like, anyhow'—shaking the thing out.

'Put it on; then I can tell better.'

The detective donned the wig.

'Yes, that's it, and no mistake. It must have fitted him uncommonly well. I never suspected that his locks were not his own. But then I did not take much notice, and he generally kept his hat on, even when he was reading. But how do you account for the wig being in the tunnel?'

'Well, I expect he got a compartment to himself, and, as soon as he was in the dark, threw his wig and goatee out of the window, shoved his spectacles into his pocket, and so altered his appearance that if you had gone on in the same train and jostled against him at Euston, you would not have known him. No use trying to catch him. His hair may be red by this time, for aught we know; and doubtless he has changed those notes long before this. You might inquire at the Bank of England.'

On that hint Romaine acted, and ascertained that the day after Dundas left Liverpool four of the one hundred pound notes he had received from Berners

Brothers were changed in Threadneedle Street for gold and notes of smaller denominations. Some of the latter had since come in from various quarters—a large proportion from Paris—the remainder were still in circulation. By the time these were presented for payment they would have passed through so many hands as to render it almost, if not quite, impossible to trace them; nor was there any reason to suppose that success in the endeavour would lead to the discovery of Mr. Dundas's whereabouts.

Nevertheless, for his own satisfaction, and with his chief's permission, Romaine made a journey to Paris, and interviewed a money-changer, to whom had been traced, through the Bank of England, several of the notes. The money-changer had received them from an American who called himself Squier, and said he was staying at the Hôtel des Princes, Rue de Richelieu. Thither Romaine went, and learnt that three weeks previously a guest of that name had stayed there three days. He was entered in the visitors' book as Silas Squier, Washington, U.S.A. According to the description given by the money-changer and the hotel people, he bore no resemblance to David D. Dundas. Whither he was gone they had no idea.

Here the quest ended. Romaine would have followed it further, but Mr. Berners thought it would be of no use, and objected to throwing good money after bad.

'Let us write the loss off and say no more about it, but mind better for the future,' he observed philosophically. 'All the same, I should like to lay that rascal by the heels.'

A month after Romaine's return from Paris, the bonds were returned from New York, accompanied by

an affidavit stating that they had been issued without the company's knowledge or consent, and that the seals attached to them were fraudulent, the signatures forged. The police were still pursuing their investigation, and still (of course) hopeful of success. Yet though they sought strenuously and suspected many things, the only positive information they were able to give was that nothing was known of David D. Dundas at 22, Charlton Street, New York, nor of Silas Squier, at Washington (District of Columbia).

Neither had they been able to hear anything of a certain Lelong upon whom suspicion had fallen. This gentleman had been employed by the company as supernumerary clerk, and dismissed for irregularity of attendance a few weeks before the discovery of the theft. But the only evidence against him, if it could be called evidence, was that nobody seemed to know much about him, and the fact that he had quitted New York without saying whither he was going.

Eventually all the bogus bonds found their way back to New York. They came from all parts of the compass—Boston, Baltimore, New Orleans, Montreal, and several from places so far off as Amsterdam and Frankfort-on-Main.

These things were not likely to be forgotten at the office in Water Street, but Romaine, being a methodical man, thought it well to write down a full account thereof, which he labelled 'The Big Swindle,' and laid aside for future reference, if peradventure the need should arise.

CHAPTER II.

MR. BERNERS' VISITOR.

ON a June morning, some two years after the events narrated in the preceding chapter, the head of the firm of Berners Brothers was deeply absorbed in the serious work of accepting drafts from New York and comparing them with the bills of lading to which they were attached and the letters in which they were advised, when a young clerk, after knocking respectfully at the door, came in on tiptoe and laid a letter and a card on his employer's desk.

'Ah! Mr. Rufus Langley,' observed the chief, glancing at the card and opening the letter. 'The gentleman in whose favour Gibbins and Murk, of New Orleans, have opened a credit with us, I suppose?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And here is a letter of introduction from Gibbins. Tell Mr. Langley that I am particularly engaged for the moment, but I shall be at his service in ten minutes.'

'Then shall I——'

'Bring him in? Certainly. Meanwhile, ask the gentleman to sit down and look at a paper.'

Mr. Berners was punctuality itself. As the door

opened to admit his visitor, he signed the last draft in the batch and handed it to the clerk.

'I am glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Langley,' he said, rising to greet him, 'and sorry to have kept you waiting; but drafts at sight demand prompt attention, and my brother, who is also my partner, is not here to-day.'

'Don't mention it, my dear sir. It is very good of you to receive me at all in business hours.'

The two men were in striking contrast. Mr. Berners was thick-set, portly, and past forty. He had a broad, high-coloured face, garnished with the mutton-chop whiskers of the period, keen gray eyes, an incipient double chin, and a bald head. In manner he was slightly pompous and condescending, as became a prosperous British merchant and a magnate of the town.

Mr. Langley was of medium stature, broad for his height, lean, wiry, muscular, well proportioned, and probably three or four years under thirty. His handsome face, adorned with a dark, drooping moustache, had a Southern cast, and suggested a Spanish or Oriental graft on an English stock; his black eyes were vigilant and active, yet when he half closed them, as sometimes happened, his expression became slightly cynical—some would have said almost sinister.

Though this gentleman was an American, his voice was not high-pitched, and albeit he obviously possessed the quality which we call assurance and the French aplomb, he treated Mr. Berners with marked deference and respect.

'You are just arrived, I presume? Won't you sit down?' said Mr. Berners, pointing to a vacant chair and resuming his own.

'I landed on Saturday.'

'Is this your first visit to Europe?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And is your object business or pleasure, may I ask?'

'I cannot imagine it being otherwise than a pleasure for an American to visit the old country. My object, however, is business, in the sense that but for the business I should not have the pleasure.'

'Ah, well, Mr. Langley, I shall be very glad, I'm sure, to—ah—to do whatever lies in my power to facilitate your business, and make your stay in Liverpool agreeable.'

Mr. Berners made this observation slowly and rather absently. He always dined Americans who came to him with proper credentials, either at his house or his club, as they impressed him favourably or the reverse, and was in some doubt whether Langley was worthy of the greater honour. The man was presentable enough, yet there was something about him which the merchant (who had his prejudices) did not quite like. His watch-chain was rather too much in evidence; he had a big ring on his little finger, and a shirt-front resplendent with diamond studs. Mr. Berners had, moreover, a decided opinion that moustaches ought to be limited to *militaires* and *mounseers*, and had elected for the club, when, his eye chancing to fall on the letter of introduction, it occurred to him that as Gibbins and Murk were new and desirable correspondents, it might be well to pay them the compliment of being exceptionally civil to their protégé, and so changed his mind.

It might appear a trivial matter, yet, as the event proved, it was big with fate and involved momentous issues to him and his.

'I—I am rather busy to-day,' he went on. 'The American mail is just in, and I have to attend a meeting of the Dock Board. But to-morrow—no, the day after to-morrow—that will be Friday—I shall be glad if you will dine with me at my house. We live in the country.'

'With pleasure, Mr. Berners. Perhaps you would kindly tell me where?'

'I was just going to say that Birdwood is eight miles away. If you can be here at five, we will drive there together—and come prepared to stay all night. I can give you quarters, and it will be pleasanter for you than returning to town after dinner.'

The American visitor thanked Mr. Berners for his kindness and took his leave, and Mr. Berners called for more drafts, and resumed his interrupted work.

Langley had taken the measure of his host, and at five sharp on the appointed day he was once more at the office. A well-appointed carriage and pair were waiting at the door, and he found Mr. Berners ready for a start.

'You are punctual,' said the merchant, with a gratified smile. 'I like people who are punctual. My father once gave me a lesson in punctuality which I never forgot. I was a boy at the time, and had gone out, promising to be back at five, in order to drive home with him. Well, I was just four minutes late, and found that he had been gone three. I could not afford the expense of a hackney coach, and in those days there was no railway; so I had to walk home eight miles in the pouring rain, and carry my parcels into the bargain. It has never happened to me since to be late for an appointment by so much as a minute. "Train up a

child——” The coachman will take your bag. Drive on, John.’

They went in the direction of West Derby, and presently reached Birdwood, a picturesque hamlet, mostly owned by the Berners, and mainly inhabited by their servants and tenants.

‘That,’ said Mr. Berners, pointing to a mansion with park-like grounds, ‘is Oatlands, my brother’s place; a little further on is mine—the Manor-House; the long, low house with the red roof showing through the trees is my sisters’. They call it the Cottage, though I am bound to say it is a pretty good-sized cottage.’

The Manor-House was ugly, being built of faded brick, and in shape something like an inverted tea-caddy. But it was big, square, solid and capacious, and the gardens and grounds were lovely and extensive. As there was half an hour to spare before dinner, Mr. Berners took his guest through the conservatories, of which he was very proud, and when Langley expressed his admiration, and opined that he must have a few gardeners, answered that he kept six, adding complacently that it was not everybody that could keep such a place up.

And then Langley was taken into the drawing-room and introduced to the ladies, of whom there were three—Mrs. Berners, Miss Berners, and Miss Ida Berners; the first a dignified and rather magnificent matron, the second a somewhat elderly maiden, whose beauty had been marred by small-pox, the third a lady who, albeit not in the first bloom of youth, had bright eyes, a comely face, a pleasant smile, and a graceful figure.

There were also present two schoolboys, home for the holidays—Frank and George.

Langley made his bow to the ladies, murmured something about the pleasure of making their acquaintance, and when dinner was announced, gave his arm to Miss Ida and took a seat by her side. For a while, however, he had little to say beyond yea and nay, rather to Miss Ida's disappointment, for, being of a lively disposition, she did not approve of taciturn neighbours. Moreover, having been rather taken with his dark eyes and drooping moustache, she expected something better from him than short answers to leading questions. He was probably contrasting his present surroundings with certain of his past experiences, and meditating on the mutability of fortune and the strange fate which had brought him into the society of fine ladies and a house where he was waited on by obsequious flunkies.

Be that as it may, when dinner was about half over, and he had drunk two or three glasses of wine, Langley threw off his apathy and found his tongue.

One of the schoolboys, whose favourite author was Fenimore Cooper, asked him, across the table, whether he had ever seen any Indians.

'Well, I have seen just a few,' said Langley, smiling — 'more than I liked sometimes.'

'More than you liked! How was that?—did you fight them? Do tell us!' exclaimed the boys in a breath.

Whereupon Langley, who seemed to have seen a good deal of the wilder parts of America, told several stories which greatly interested his adult listeners and hugely delighted Frank and George, all the more so as his adventures, having been mainly among the horse Indians on the Mexican frontier, were something quite new to them,

CHAPTER III.

THE TAMING OF THE HORSE.

WHEN the ladies had withdrawn, Mr. Berners pushed the decanter towards his guest, and invited him to help himself.

‘You don’t get port like this every day,’ said he. ‘It stood my father in a guinea a bottle twenty years ago. You seem to have seen a good deal of life.’

‘Of certain phases of life, I have,’ returned Langley, as he filled his glass, ‘but very little of the life of cities, or mansions such as this.’

If the merchant had a weakness, it was pride in his wealth and his house, and when he had eaten with appetite and drunk half a bottle or so of his favourite vintage, he was apt to become expansive and confidential, and occasionally somewhat boastful.

‘Well, it is a fine old place,’ he returned, ‘and, as I said before, it is not everybody that could keep such a place up. Most of the land hereabouts belongs to my brother and myself—and it has greatly increased in value since we bought it—except the Cottage and twenty acres, belonging to my sisters. They are very well off—very well off. When my father had given us the business and an ample working capital, he thought

he had done enough for his sons, so he left the remainder to the girls—fifty thousand pounds apiece—settled, of course. They cannot touch the principal, but what they save they can, of course, do what they like with. I don't think they will ever marry, though. They have had chances, of course—lots, especially Ida. But they prefer freedom and an income of something like six thousand a year between them to matrimony and a master. And, gad, I think they are right—don't you ?

'Decidedly,' said the American. 'Six thousand pounds—thirty thousand dollars. I know if I had that much a year, or half it——'

'You wouldn't burden yourself with a wife,' put in the merchant, laughing as though he had made a good joke; 'and a wife would be a burden in one of those wild expeditions you were telling us about. Why'—looking through the window—'the ladies are in the garden! What do you say to joining them?'

Langley said 'Yes,' and the two men put on their hats and went out.

It was the prime of summer-time, when the long twilights, illumined by a radiant moon, make the days seem endless, and chase darkness for a season from the earth.

Mr. Berners suggested a stroll through the grounds.

'Let us show Mr. Langley the stables; he knows about horses and that,' exclaimed one of the boys, who did not much care for the proposed promenade, and wanted more stories.

'All in good time, Frank. The stables are shut up for the night.'

'Anyhow, he can see Bruiser.'

'Very well, we will go round by the paddock.'

'Who is Bruiser?' asked the visitor.

'A white elephant. A horse I can neither use nor sell—a regular devil. My coachman bought him at a fair, after a veterinary examination and a trial; but the brute had no doubt been drugged, or cowed into temporary submission. At any rate, his evil propensities were not discovered for several days, and then——'

'He nearly killed poor Chaffers,' quoth Frank.

'Yes, and kicked a hole in the stable ceiling. We tried short commons, which so far subdued him that we contrived, with great difficulty—it took four men—to put a saddle on his back. Then one of them got up, galloped him to a standstill, and before he recovered his wind we had him harnessed and between the shafts of a heavy brake. But the next day he was just as bad as ever, and I could neither go on starving him—if a horse works, he must eat—nor let my servants continue risking their lives. I just turned him out, and there he is, as you see, a very fine animal.'

So he was. A big 'upstanding' chestnut, wide-girthed and well ribbed up, with legs as clean as a colt's, powerful quarters, sloping shoulders, a neck like a rainbow, and an Arab-like head.

'I have offered to give him to anybody who would halter and take him away, and a neighbouring horse-dealer made the attempt, and got worried nearly to death for his pains, and now nobody will have Bruiser, even as a gift. I am afraid I shall be obliged to shoot the brute; but it would be a great pity, for he rides and drives splendidly once he is harnessed. Bridling him is the great difficulty.'

'Would you mind letting me try my hand?' said

Langley, who, while his host was talking, had been watching the horse closely.

'What! try to tame Bruiser?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, I will let you try with pleasure. But are you quite sure? I should be sorry for him to hurt you.'

'I don't think he will hurt me.'

'When will you try, Mr. Langley?' demanded Frank eagerly.

'Right now, if you can find me a few yards of stout hempen cord.'

Frank went off like a shot, and in a few minutes returned with the cord.

'Are you going to make a lasso?' he asked.

'No; for a lasso I should want two leaden balls. I must try what I can do with a lariat. I think I can make one that will serve.'

After testing the stoutness of the cord, cutting off the length he required, making two or three big knots at one end and a noose at the other, Langley rolled it into a coil, which he hung on the gate-post. Next he doffed his hat and dress-coat, and vaulted lightly over the locked gate.

'Have a care,' said Mr. Berners earnestly. 'As I told you just now, Bruiser has a strong objection to being bridled or haltered. If you go near him with that rope, he will either run at you open-mouthed or lash out with his heels when you are least expecting it.'

'All right, sir, I'll have a care.'

And with that Langley took the lariat and made straight for Bruiser, who was quietly grazing in the paddock. As the intruder drew near, the horse raised

his head and regarded him curiously, as much as to say, 'Who are you, and what the deuce do you want here?'

Meanwhile, Langley went on, and when he was about an arm's length from the animal, came to a halt and dangled the lariat before him. Giving a wicked little scream, Bruiser wheeled swiftly round, and lashed out with a will. But the stroke, though well aimed, missed its mark. Langley sprang aside with acrobatic agility, and, using the knotted rope as a whip, dealt Bruiser a tremendous cut on the quarter, whereupon the astonished animal gave another tremendous kick in the air and galloped to the other end of the enclosure.

Thither Langley followed him, and exhibited the rope as before. For a moment Bruiser seemed undecided whether to kick or bite, and then, throwing his ears back and showing his teeth, ran open-mouthed at his adversary. Again Langley sprang aside, but quickly turning, he gave the horse two rapid, vigorous strokes on the muzzle, making him first back and then rear. This was the American's opportunity. He made his cast, entangling Bruiser's fore-legs in the noose in such fashion that the horse came down on his knees instead of his feet, and before he could even attempt to regain them, Langley had pushed him over on his side, and was sitting on the prostrate animal's head.

The ladies clapped their hands, the boys shouted gleefully, and Mr. Berners cried, 'Well done!'

After inflicting on the conquered animal sundry indignities, such as pulling his tail, shouting in his ears, and standing on his ribs, Langley loosed the lariat and let him get up, bestriding him as he rose. Then, guiding him with knees and voice, his victor rode him round the paddock.

'Is he quiet enough, do you think?' asked Langley, as he dismounted near the gate, and joined Mr. Berners and the others.

'You have tamed him, and no mistake! I never saw anything like it. Why, he is as quiet as an old donkey! But will he remain so, do you think?' asked the merchant.

'Certainly, when he has had another lesson or two, provided you give him lots of work and little corn.'

'The boys want me to ask a favour of you, Mr. Langley,' said Mrs. Berners graciously.

'I am sure I shall be very happy.'

'They want to see more of you—so do we all; and if you are not obliged to return to Liverpool to-morrow, we shall be glad if you will stay with us until Monday.'

'We are having some friends next Wednesday—a garden-party—and if you can come we shall be very pleased to see you,' put in Miss Ida, with her most winning smile.

Langley, whom the compliment appeared to gratify, accepted both invitations with evident pleasure. Yet a shade of something like displeasure darkened for a moment the merchant's honest face—he had not intended getting on quite so fast with a gentleman of whom he knew so little—but as it was impossible, without a breach of hospitality and good manners, to remain silent, he concurred with seeming cordiality in his wife's invitation.

'And we will go out for a ride. I want to see Mr. Langley ride Bruiser when he is fresh. Will you go, too, Aunt Ida? Aunt Ida is very fond of horses—she hunts,' exclaimed Frank impetuously.

The lady in question smiled again, and said she should

be very glad. As they resumed their walk, Langley made and lighted a cigarette—*cigarillo* he called it—to the surprise of the boys and the ladies, cigarette-smoking being then little practised in England.

‘Where did you acquire that art, Mr. Langley?’ asked Miss Ida.

‘Where I learnt to tame restive horses—in Mexico.’

‘But you are an American?’—glancing curiously at his dark, gipsy-like face.

‘Do you mean that Mexicans are not Americans? A Mexican *caballero* with Spanish and Aztec blood in his veins has more right to the designation than a mere citizen of the United States. I was born in America, though, as my father was a British subject, and never renounced his nationality, I hardly know what to call myself.’

‘You may call yourself either American or British. You are equally eligible for the Premiership of this country or the Presidentship of the United States,’ observed Mr. Berners, with a somewhat grim smile.

‘Which would you rather be?’ inquired Miss Ida.

‘President or Premier, do you mean?’

‘Which country do you like best? I should say.’

‘Well, as a man whose fortune is to make, I think I like America the best,’ returned Langley, laughing pleasantly. ‘But if my fortune were made, I should be disposed to settle in England.’

‘So you intend to return to America?’

‘Certainly.’

After this Miss Ida became rather pensive, and asked no more questions, and she and her sister presently took their leave, and were escorted home through the fields by their brother and his guest.

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CHAPTER IV.

LANGLEY’S LOVE-MAKING.

THE Cottage had no more charming apartment than the morning-room. The walls were adorned with water-colour drawings, vases of flowers stood on the table, and long windows, framed in ivy, and overhung with roses, looked out on an old-fashioned garden and verdant lawn.

Here, on the morning after Mr. Langley’s advent, sat the sisters sipping their coffee. Miss Berners wore a wrapper, and her rather scanty locks were arranged in corkscrew curls. Miss Ida was attired for a ride, and well she looked in her tight-fitting habit and ample skirt. Her auburn hair lay close to her shapely head; though the face was too small for her height, the profile was fine, and, despite her nearly thirty years, her complexion was fresh and almost youthful.

‘Well, I cannot say I like him,’ Miss Berners was saying.

‘Why? Because he is a man?’ asked Ida, with an ironic smile.

‘That might be a sufficient reason for doubting him, not for disliking him. I am sure those studs are paste, and I detest moustaches.’

'How do you know his studs are paste? And his moustache becomes him.'

'I don't agree with you. In my opinion he is either a Jew, a gipsy, or a circus rider.'

'Jews don't eat bacon, and he took some with his roast fowl; and you heard him say that his father was English.'

'There are English gipsies and circus riders, I suppose?'

'Anyhow, they don't come to Berners Brothers with letters of introduction from American correspondents; and Mr. Langley is a gentleman, and well educated; anybody can see that.'

'I am not so sure about the gentleman. We cannot always explain our antipathies; but I am not often wrong in my intuitions, and mark me if it does not come out, sooner or later, that this man is sailing under false colours. I was never more surprised in my life than when Maria asked him to stay over Sunday, and you asked him to the garden-party.'

'What on earth do you mean, Cordelia? Am I not justified in asking a guest at our brother's house to ours? I should attach more importance to your previsions if you did not set down every other man you meet as an actual or potential villain. In my opinion, Mr. Langley is a thorough gentleman. We know he is brave, and I believe he is honest.'

'Good heavens, Ida! you are surely not going to fall in love with this American whipper-snapper, of whom nobody knows anything?'

'I fall in love? The idea! All the same——'

And then, without finishing the sentence, Miss Ida rose from her chair, gathered up her skirts, and marched indignantly from the room.

Miss Berners was not without warrant for her mistrust of men. A dozen years previously she had been wooed by a gentleman of means and position. Shortly before the day fixed for the marriage, the bride-elect was stricken down with small-pox, which not only bereft her of her beauty, but disfigured her for life, whereupon her lover, like the cur he was, broke off the engagement. From that time forth Cordelia Berners put no faith in man. Whenever she heard of a girl of her acquaintance being engaged, she would say, 'Poor thing!' It was principally owing to her influence that her sister had remained single. Cordelia had always succeeded in persuading her that the men who sought her hand were actuated by mercenary motives, and as none of them had made much impression on her heart, much less won her love, it was not difficult for her to follow her sister's advice.

On the Sunday Langley accompanied his host and hostess to the village church, where his behaviour confirmed Miss Berners in her suspicions. He did not seem at ease, had a difficulty in finding the places in his Prayer-Book, never responded, and during Mr. Allbutt's excellent discourse yawned at least six times.

'You may depend upon it he has not been to church for years,' observed Miss Cordelia to her sister as they walked home. 'In fact, I rather doubt whether he was ever inside a church before.'

'Cannot you find something else against him? You will say next he is no Christian.'

'I might not be far wrong if I did. He has been in Mexico, a Roman Catholic country. Perhaps he is a Papist, and that would be worse.'

'Worse than being a Christian, do you mean?'

'No, I don't. I mean worse than nothing.'

'Why not say that he is a heathen, and worships stocks and stones? He has been among the Indians, and they worship stocks and stones. But, heathen or not, he cannot well have a less charitable spirit than some people who make great professions.'

Miss Berners, who was orthodox to the backbone, looked terribly shocked, and, either sensible of the justice of her sister's reproach or having no answer ready, let the subject drop—for the moment.

Langley showed to greater advantage at the garden-party than he had done at church. Miss Ida had somehow discovered that he was musical, and at her instance he brought his banjo and sang, to his own accompaniment, a Spanish song about a *caballero* and a *señorita*, and several negro melodies, all of which seemed to give great satisfaction and were warmly applauded. For which cause, and his conquest of Bruiser, and his frontier and Mexican stories, his black eyes, drooping moustache, and brigand-like appearance, he was quite a cynosure, and received many offers of hospitality and requests to subdue restive steeds. In fact, he became so general a favourite that when Mrs. Berners asked him to make the Manor-House his home and headquarters during his sojourn in England, her husband felt himself constrained to second the invitation. Langley, on his part, promptly accepted the proposal, adding, however, that he should shortly have to go to London, Birmingham and the Continent on the business which had brought him across the sea—the sale of the patent rights of a wonderful rifle, lately invented in America.

Nevertheless, Cordelia Berners persisted in her unbelief.

'I am sure the fellow is an adventurer,' she continually repeated to herself, and lost no opportunity of hinting, sometimes saying, as much to her sister.

Now, it happens to most people to fall in love at least once in their lives. Some begin when they are young, and go on falling in love until they are married, in a few cases even to the end of their lives. Others fall in love once for all, and the intensity of the malady is generally in direct proportion to the age of the victim. When a woman well on to thirty falls in love for the first time, she is likely to love less discreetly and more resolutely than a girl in her teens.

Of this sort was Ida Berners. She had taken a strong fancy to Langley from the first. Why, was not apparent even to herself. She had declined offers from men equally good-looking and far more eligible—men whose characters were above suspicion, and whose antecedents were known to everybody. But there is a fate in these things, and Ida's fate was come. And her passion was fed by her sister's unreasoning antipathy to Langley, and Langley's seeming insensibility to her charms. Considering the difference in their ages and positions—that she was an heiress and he a wanderer—Ida thought it right to give him a little encouragement—to let him see, by a special graciousness of manner and other signs and tokens, that he might venture to put a certain momentous question without fearing a rebuff.

But, whether from shyness, indifference, or design, Langley failed for a while to profit by his opportunities, to Ida's great concern, though it made her think all the better of him.

'He is thoroughly disinterested,' she said to herself. 'He does not care for my money in the least. Perhaps he does not care for me.'

And then her heart sank, and she felt very unhappy, for her love was great.

A day or two after Langley's return from London, he called at the Cottage, and found Ida alone.

She had been in a doleful mood, but his appearance chased away her gloom, and she received him with smiles.

After the exchange of a few commonplaces, Langley, who seemed unusually serious, remarked that he had finished his business in England.

'Satisfactorily, I hope?' said she.

'Yes. I have sold the patent rights, and now I must go to Liège, and try to dispose of the Belgian rights. Then I shall return to America from Antwerp.'

Ida turned pale.

'Return to America!' she exclaimed.

Langley turned pale also; then, after what appeared to be a momentary mental struggle, he took her hand, and said, in a low, hesitating voice:

'If you wish me to stay, dear Miss Ida, I will stay.'

Ida made no answer, but she did not withdraw her hand, and her eyes said, 'Stay!'

'For your sake I will do anything or go anywhere,' he went on, warming, as it were, to his work, and looking tenderly into her eyes. 'I love you dearly, and should have spoken sooner had I not feared that you might misconstrue my motives, for you are rich, and my fortune is still to make.'

'Never mind that. I have enough for both of us—if you think three thousand a year enough.'

'Oh yes, more than enough; and I shall work. I have several things in view which are likely to do well. But your brothers and your sister—what will they say?'

'I don't care what they say. I am quite old enough to please myself. The income arising from my settled fortune is entirely at my own disposal, and I have ten thousand in Consols that I can do what I like with.'

'Ah, in that case,' returned Langley, showing his white teeth through his drooping moustache—'in that case you are quite your own mistress.'

And then he protested his love anew, and Ida was very happy. Before they separated it was agreed that she should tell her sister of their engagement, he her brother.

'But remember,' she said, 'that Robert is neither my father nor my guardian. I shall be pleased to have his approval of my choice; but nothing he or any other body may say will make any difference to you and me.'

Ida expected a scene with Cordelia, and was not disappointed. But she kept cool and remained firm, and when the elder sister found that Ida was fully resolved to have her own way, she observed solemnly:

'Well, you cannot say that I have not warned you; and ill will come of it, mark me if it does not. I believe this man is an adventurer and a ne'er-do-weel, and my intuitions are seldom wrong,' and then relapsed into portentous silence.

Ida smiled. She had never much believed in her sister's warnings and intuitions; now she despised them.

When Langley informed Mr. Berners of the engagement, he seemed thunderstruck. Having made up his mind that his sisters had made up theirs never to

marry, he had not thought of Langley as a possible suitor. On recovering from his surprise, he became intensely indignant and icily polite. Ida being of age, he observed, and having thought fit to decide for herself, he did not see that he was called upon to offer an opinion, which, moreover, might not be quite agreeable to Mr. Langley. Nevertheless, if Mr. Langley thought fit to give any information as to his means, position, and family, it might influence her friends more favourably than at the first blush seemed likely. For his own part, he must say that—that——

And then, not finding the words he wanted, and perhaps thinking he had said enough, Mr. Berners paused for a reply.

‘Well, I am not a rich man—as compared with yourself, I am unquestionably poor; while as for what you call position, I don’t think I have any,’ answered Langley bluntly.

‘Nor profession?’ inquired the merchant.

‘Well, I think I know a thing or two about horses, and cattle, and fighting Indians, and prospecting for gold; and as I spent a few months in a merchant’s office after leaving college, I am not ignorant of business.’

‘So you have been at college?’

‘Yes, sir; and before that I was at school,’ returned Langley resentfully. ‘Anything else?’

‘If you have nothing more to impart, I have nothing more to ask.’

‘You said something about my family. Well, the little I know you shall know, and it certainly is not much. My father came of a good family in the North of England, but he offended his people so much by his marriage that they would have nothing more to do

with him, and treated him and my mother so ill that he would have nothing more to do with them. After his marriage he went to Georgia, where I was born. He gave me a good schooling, and destined me for a profession; but while I was at college he died, and I had to shift for myself. I tried business, but as desk-work did not suit me, I took to a rambling life; went to Texas, Mexico, and other wild parts. I have made money now and then, but, to tell the truth, I am not good at keeping it. A little while ago I bought an interest in the Perfect rifle—so called after the inventor—and I dare say it will make me a few thousand dollars. I have given a good deal of thought to the improvement of firearms.'

'Ah, indeed, have you? To what part of the North of England—what county and locality, I mean—did your father's family belong?'

'I cannot tell you. I have told you all I know. It was a subject my father preferred to avoid.'

'And you have never thought of looking them up?'

'What would be the good? My father's contemporaries are all dead and gone by this time. The present generation would probably not care to know me, and I am sure I do not care to know them.'

'Well, Mr. Langley, I can merely repeat that, as Ida is of age and her own mistress, she must take the entire responsibility of the step which she contemplates. But I can at least congratulate *you*.'

Langley's black eyes flashed dangerously.

'I did not ask you to congratulate me, Mr. Berners. You might have saved yourself the trouble,' he said haughtily, and then, rising from his chair, abruptly quitted the room.

CHAPTER V.

FAMILY JARS.

LATER in the day Mr. Berners had an interview with Ida, and besought her to renounce the idea of marrying a man of whom they knew so little—hardly anything, in fact—and who, as he himself admitted, had neither means, position, nor profession; but she stopped him as peremptorily as she had stopped her sister.

‘As I have quite made up my mind, discussion would be worse than useless,’ said she; ‘and if we are to remain friends, you will be good enough not to say unpleasant things about my future husband.’

And then she told her brother that she meant to make Langley a present of one moiety of her Consols; the other moiety was to be settled on herself, with a life interest to him.

‘Settle it all,’ urged her brother.

‘No. If I can trust him with myself, I can trust him with my money. I cannot give him any part of what father left me—not even a life interest.’

‘For which you ought to be truly thankful.’

‘But as touching income, we shall have a common purse.’

‘Which you will provide.’

But seeing that argument was vain, he ceased cavilling, and as the result of a conference with Cordelia, it was resolved not to oppose further what they were unable to prevent. They had discharged their consciences by telling Ida what they thought, and ill as they augured of the course she was taking, nothing was to be gained by defying Langley and irritating her, or letting their neighbours know that they did not approve of her choice.

'Let us wash our dirty linen at home, whatever we do,' said the brother, and when next he met Langley treated him with his customary condescending affability, and Cordelia constrained herself to be decently civil to him. She should go to the wedding, she said, and afterwards (not desiring to be a witness of her sister's misery) to Bath—an arrangement which would have the incidental advantage of leaving the newly-married couple in undisturbed possession of the Cottage.

The marriage was fixed to take place at the end of the following month. Meanwhile Mr. Berners, albeit well aware that nothing short of proof-positive that her lover was either a murderer or a Benedict would induce Ida to change her mind, wrote to his correspondent at New Orleans for further information about Langley, and Langley started for Belgium, to complete the business which had brought him to Europe.

This project Ida would have had him forego, asking him playfully whether he did not prefer his lady-love to a patent rifle, and hinting that, as his cake was practically baked, there was no reason why he should trouble himself about business; to which Langley answered that he was acting not for himself alone, and in duty to his partner must put the thing through. But he

promised to despatch his business quickly, and return 'inside of a week.'

And then Ida spoke of the present she proposed to make him, and wanted him to accept a transfer of the Consols before he left.

'You are very, very kind,' he said, kissing her, 'but, if it is all the same to you, I would rather not.'

'Why? I want to show you how thoroughly I trust you.'

'You have done that by agreeing to marry me. Don't you think I want you more than all the Consols in the world? Look here, Ida,' he continued, with emotion. 'In my wild, rambling life I have not met many good women. You are the best woman I ever knew. I am altogether unworthy of you. Don't make me feel still more unworthy. If I took this money I should feel bad—worse than I can tell you. I should despise myself. Your brother was not very kind the other day, but if I let you give me five thousand pounds he would be justified in all he said—and would have said, if he had spoken out—and even more.'

'Very well, dear; let it be as you wish,' said Ida, with seeming regret, yet in her heart of hearts well pleased; for Langley's refusal of her proffered gift confirmed her belief in his disinterestedness, and could hardly fail to convince Richard and Cordelia that he was worthy of her love and their esteem.

Meanwhile Richard and Cordelia were discussing the same subject.

'The idea of Ida giving him five thousand pounds before they are married!' Mr. Berners exclaimed. 'She is surely off her head. Suppose he does not return?'

'In that event,' said the spinster grimly—'in that

event, my dear brother, the money would be well laid out, and the best investment Ida ever made. If he could be induced to return to his native country, and never show his face in these parts again, I would gladly make the sum ten thousand. Do you think——'

'It would be any use making the offer? No; I don't think it would be the least use. Unless the man is a villain—and I sincerely hope, for Ida's sake, he is not—unless he is a villain, the mere suggestion would be an insult; and if he is a villain, he might take the money and marry Ida all the same. You could have no security for the fulfilment of his part of the contract.'

'True; I never thought of that before. Well, what cannot be cured must be endured, I suppose. We have done all we could. But I fear—I very much fear—that Ida will bitterly rue the step she is taking, and my intuitions are seldom wrong. You must have observed that my intuitions are seldom wrong, Richard?'

'I have observed that you always look on the dark side of things, and take for granted that every marriage you know of will turn out badly. Do cease your croakings, and let us make the best of it, Cordelia. I was certainly very angry when Langley told me, but, now the die is cast, I shall spare no effort to keep on good terms with him for Ida's sake. As friends we may exercise an influence for good over him; as enemies—— But that is an alternative I would rather not consider; and remember, that though our knowledge of Langley is so slight, we know nothing bad of him.'

'Except that by his own admission he has always been at a loose end,' answered Cordelia rather spitefully—young men to whom this description applied being her brother's special abhorrence. However, as

you say, it is well to hope for the best ; but you must acknowledge that my intuitions——'

'Oh, bother your intuitions ! There is no end to them,' growled Mr. Berners.

Whereupon Cordelia, putting on a martyized look and making a gesture of despair, turned away. Presently Ida joined them, and told how splendidly her lover had behaved about the money, how nobly disinterested he was, and reproached her brother and sister for not thinking so well of Langley as she thought herself.

'Refused the Consols, did he ? Well, I am glad to hear it, if only for your sake, Ida,' said Mr. Berners heartily. 'If I have distrusted the man wrongly, I regret it, and shall try to make amends.'

But Cordelia had nailed her colours to the mast.

'It is just his craft,' quoth she. 'He is deep ; anybody can see that. He knows he will get all you have in a few weeks, and refused the Consols merely to hoodwink you and gain credit with us. Richard has swallowed the bait, but I know better. My intuitions are seldom wrong, and something tells me——'

'Something tells me that you are hard, unjust and unkind, and because you were jilted want me not to marry. You are like the fox in the fable that lost its tail,' broke in Ida bitterly, thereby so incensing Cordelia that if Richard had not intervened with soothing words, there would probably have been a battle-royal and life-long estrangement.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNPLEASANT SURPRISE.

WHEN the 'head and front of the offending,' in the person of Mr. Langley, reached Lime Street Station on his way to Belgium, he fell in with several of his compatriots, who had landed in Liverpool overnight, and, like himself, were bound for the Metropolis. Before-time he had travelled second class, but being now in good feather, and by nature lavish, he took a first-class ticket, and gave the guard a crown to put him where he might smoke (smoking at that time was strictly prohibited—and continually practised—on the company's premises and in the company's carriages), and he had no sooner settled himself in his corner than he was joined by three other travellers, all, like himself, bent on defying the by-law in question.

'It is all right,' said the burly, red-faced guard, putting his head in at the window. 'I have locked the door; nobody can come in. But don't fire up until we are off.'

When they were through Edge Hill Tunnel, cigars were produced, and the travellers began to take stock of each other.

'I think I have seen you before,' said one of them, looking hard at Langley.

‘On the Mississippi, wasn’t it, when the *Watersnake* blew up?’

‘In the Mississippi, I should say. I know I was in, and you pulled me out. I was not in a condition to thank you then, but I do now most heartily. I have often wondered to whom I was indebted for my life on that occasion; and if you wouldn’t mind——’

‘My name is Rufus J. Langley.’

‘And mine James T. Meach, of St. Louis. When did you come over?’

Langley gave a vague answer, and when Mr. Meach inquired what became of him after the blowing up of the *Watersnake*, and where he lived when he was at home, he changed the subject to London, of which, as he had been there before, he knew more than his companions, and possibly pretended to a greater knowledge than he possessed. Asked what was going on, he spoke of Ascot Races, and, on Mr. Meach’s motion, it was resolved that they should hire a drag and drive down on the Cup day. Langley had not forgotten his promise to Ida, but horses were his passion, and he could not renounce the chance of seeing a great race in congenial company; and it would not delay him more than a day.

‘Get one that will hold a baker’s dozen,’ said Meach. ‘We have women-folk in the fore and aft boxes of the car, and I guess they’ll want to go along.’

And then somebody proposed a game at poker, and by the time the train reached Euston, Langley had won five pounds.

‘You have played before, I think,’ remarked Mr. Meach significantly, as they were settling up; and Langley smilingly owned to the soft impeachment. He had already agreed to accompany his countrymen to Morley’s

Hotel. On his previous visit to town he had put up at the Bull and Mouth, St. Martin's le Grand.

The next day Langley made arrangements for the trip to Ascot, as to which the countrymen aforesaid gave him a free hand.

'You boss the job and we'll pay the shot,' said Mr. Meach.

The result justified their confidence. Langley obtained the address of a reputable livery stable, and thither betook himself. The keeper received him with distinction, quoted a price, and showed him a vehicle which seemed the very thing. Langley engaged it on the spot, and asked to see the nags, whereupon the proprietor of the establishment produced four screws, two of which made a 'slight noise.'

Langley laughed scornfully, recommended him to send them to the knacker, and, going deliberately round the stables, picked out four spanking bays, of high quality and sound. Their owner protested that he could not possibly let him have his very best team at the figure he had named, on which Langley told him, with a *grand seigneur* air, to increase it by twenty-five per cent., and do the thing as handsomely as he knew how.

He also engaged a guard, who possessed a whole arsenal of wind instruments, including a gaspipe, on which, besides playing 'Yankee Doodle' and 'The Posthorn Galop,' he could perform some startling ventriloquial feats, making it seem as though the sounds it produced proceeded from afar; and Morley's manager received carte blanche as to the commissariat, and strict orders to see that nothing lacked.

Only the weather was left to chance, and as that

proved propitious, the excursion was a great success. No better-appointed turn-out or merrier party careered through Slough and Royal Windsor on that brightest of days. So soon as they were clear of the town, Langley took the reins, and surprised the coachman as much by his skilful 'tooling' as he had surprised the master by his knowledge of horseflesh. As he sat on the box, handling the 'ribbons' and flourishing his whip, a carnation in his buttonhole and his hat set jauntily on one side, he seemed quite in his element, and looked joyous and happy.

All the same, it would have saved him trouble if he had gone straight to Antwerp, according to his original design.

The Americans were early on the course, and when the horses had been unyoked, and a few bottles of champagne drunk, and Langley had studied the correct card of the races, he strolled off alone to the ring to find out what odds the bookies were offering, and ascertain, if he could, which horse was likely to win the cup.

When he had done this, and (acting on general impressions) backed Sherlock to win and the Lady of Shalot for a place, he hied him back to his friends, and was within sight of the coach, when a swarthy fellow, with big black whiskers, a white hat, and a horsey get-up, tapped him on the shoulder and whispered in his ear:

'*Sar shon, my rinkenopal?*' (How do you do, my pretty brother?)

Langley turned round as promptly as a soldier when he is ordered to 'right about face.'

'You here, Sol!' he exclaimed, in a tone of suppressed vexation and displeased surprise.

'Yes, I thought I would like to see the old country once again. So did you, it seems. I saw you drive on the course like a Duke, with two flunkies and a trumpeter, and a gay company of swells and fine ladies; also I saw you hand a bookie a handful of bank-notes. Been backing the favourite, I suppose? Don't think he'll win, though. Better back Pocahontas. How have you collared the dibs?—inherited a fortune, robbed a bank, or found a gold-mine?'

'None of them. But this is no place for an exchange of confidences. Come to me to-night, and we will have a long talk.'

'*Con mucho gusto*, as the Mexicans say. Where do you hang out, and what time?'

'The Bull and Mouth, opposite the General Post Office, at ten.'

'All right; I'll be there. Have you such a thing about you as a *chinamangri* (five-pound note)? *Balansers* (sovereigns) will do. I dare say you gave all your flimsy to that bookie you was talking to just now. I want to back Pocahontas, and I'm dead broke.'

Langley gave him a five-pound note, and was turning away, when Sol touched him on the shoulder a second time, and whispered:

'What's become of Juanita?'

Langley wheeled round again, scowling, and, after a moment's hesitation, answered that the last time he heard of her Juanita was at Chihuahua.

'Ware quicksands, Rufus Junius! If you play that *chi* (girl) false, she'll be the death of you.'

Langley smoothed his countenance and made for the coach, and by the time he reached it looked as careless as he felt concerned.

'Found a friend?' asked Mr. Meach, who had observed the interview.

'No, only a confounded gipsy fellow who wanted to tell my fortune.'

'You crossed his hand with something, I think?'

'I gave the ruffian a few coppers to get rid of him.'

'And didn't let him tell your fortune?'

'No, it would have been all nonsense.'

'Well, I guess you are about right. Have a cocktail; it'll whet your appetite for lunch.'

Langley took the cocktail, and albeit the meeting with Sol and the possibilities it suggested were cause for serious anxiety, he contrived to keep up a show of high spirits during the remainder of the day. The defeat of Sherlock annoyed him less than the victory of Pocahontas. It made him 'feel bad' to think that Sol had been sharper, or better informed than himself, and with the 'fiver' he gave him had probably won two hundred, for the odds against Pocahontas, a rank outsider, had been twenty to one.

On the return journey Langley took the reins again, as much from necessity as choice—the coachman being so drunk that there was nothing for it but to bundle him inside and leave him there. The musical guard, also far gone, slept on his seat, to the great danger of his neck; but every now and then he would waken up with a spasmodic start and produce sounds from his gaspipe hideous enough, as Mr. James T. Meach forcibly said, to set Satan's teeth on edge and send him back, howling, to his own quarters; and, as he was deaf alike to entreaties and commands, one of the travellers took the instrument furtively from its place and dropped it into the road.

When they separated for the night, Langley bade his companions good-bye. He would gladly have spent another day or two with them, but so pressing was his business that he must start early next morning for the Continent.

'Well, we shall be here for a week,' observed Mr. Meach, as they shook hands. 'If you are back before then, look us up; if not, just drop me a line saying where you are to be found. I should like to see more of you. A letter addressed 'Care of Berners Brothers, Liverpool,' will find me any time within the next three months. I have a credit there.'

'All right; I will remember—Berners Brothers, Liverpool,' returned Langley, with a strange smile.

The same night Sol, 'the gipsy fellow,' called at the Bull and Mouth and asked for Mr. Rufus J. Langley.

'No such person here,' answered the florid and rotund dame who presided at the bar counter.

'I think there is, if you'll be good enough to inquire, ma'm,' said the gipsy respectfully.

'I'm sure there isn't. We are not half full, and have none but regular customers. I know 'em all.'

'Has there been any gentleman of that name here lately—inside of a month? Can you tell me that?'

'Impossible. We have sometimes forty or fifty gentlemen coming and going on a single day. How can I remember all their names?'

'If you would kindly look through your books.'

'Out of the question. I haven't the time—nobody here has time. A glass of brandy for 17, an Irish whisky for 21, a Welsh rabbit and a bottle of stout for 43—all right, John.'

Seeing that the landlady had said her last word, Sol turned away, growling curses 'not loud but deep.'

'Done brown!' he muttered; 'done to a turn! It's my own fault. I shouldn't have lost sight of him. He's in luck, and doesn't want an old pal to share in his good fortune. But I'll unearth him, if it costs me every pound I've got in my pocket—and I have got three hundred, also the straight tip for the St. Leger. And if he won't bleed, and if, as I suspect, there is a *churi* (sweetheart) in the case, a word to Juanita would bring her from the ends of the earth. And, failing that—and Chihuahua is a devil of a way off, and she a wandering star—failing that, why, I must just frighten him, and threaten to stop any little game he may have on. I could do that. And the Old Man! Have they dissolved partnership, I wonder? Oh, he's a downy cove, is the Old Man! Rufus Junius is no fool, and I know a thing or two, but we cannot hold a candle to the Old Man. Wonder where he is, and what's his blooming name at this present? He's as clever at making himself scarce when he's wanted and turning up when you don't want him and least expect him as that old bloke with the invisible ring R. J. was telling about when the alcalde's posse was after us on the Santa Fé trail. . . . Gyges!—ay, that was it! Gyges—the Old Man's as smart as Gyges!'

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CHAPTER VII.

HOW LANGLEY GOT HIS PROMOTION.

WHATEVER may have been Langley's design in going to Belgium, his sojourn there was of the briefest.

After staying a day at Antwerp, wandering about the docks, as might seem, in a very undecided state of mind, calling at a shipping office and interviewing the master of a Baltimore clipper, he went on to Brussels, where he found two *poste restante* letters to his address. Thrusting them both into his pocket, he returned, still pensive, to the hotel where he had taken up his quarters.

One of the letters bore the Birdwood postmark; the other was from America.

For a moment Langley hesitated, then, muttering, 'The bane first, the antidote afterwards,' opened the letter from America. It was long, and, as might appear, not altogether to his liking, for he had no sooner made himself master of the contents than he tore the missive into fragments and consumed them with fire.

This done, he opened the other letter. It was from Ida, beautifully written, and while free from gush and untainted by silly sentiment, breathing love and tenderness in every line—the letter of a true-hearted, womanly woman. It affected Langley deeply, put an end to his

hesitation, and called into full activity his better nature.

'My God! what have I done to deserve love like this?' he thought. 'I have not deserved it. I don't deserve it. I am not worthy to touch the hem of her garment. . . . It would break her heart. Yet, even though she knew all, I don't think she would give me up. And I won't play her false or go back from my word, though I die for it. The Old Man may go to Old Harry. And ill-gotten gains are no good. They always go faster than they come. Besides, I don't need—I shall have all I want, and can live the life of a country gentleman, like my forefathers. And as for Juanita, I have done her no wrong; it's the other way about. Didn't she try to knife me? She is as handsome as they make 'em, but what a virago! . . . She will never find me out—not she; how can she? Nor Sol either—not he. Anyhow, I am going to turn over a new leaf, and do the right thing for once.'

When Langley had come to this resolution, he sat down and wrote to Ida, thanking her for her letter, assuring her of his love, and saying that he should be with her before the expiration of his leave of absence.

Then he wrote another letter, thus conceived:

'DEAR BOSS NOGO,

'*Les agents de la bourse* (police spies) smell a rat, and the goods cannot be got. Think I shall make back-tracks viâ Antwerp, but will write again. Expect me when you see me.

'ROMANY RYE.'

This letter he addressed, 'Mrs. Mantis Lee, Marietta, Ga., Les Etats Unis,' and consigned it, together with

Ida's, to the post-office. An hour later Langley started for Ostend, whence he crossed to Dover, and returning as fast as express trains could take him to Liverpool, reached Birdwood an hour after the arrival of his letter.

Ida was naturally delighted with this further proof of her lover's devotion, and not only because he was her lover. She hoped that Langley's faithful fulfilment of his promise and prompt return would raise him in the estimation of her sister and brother, and convince them of the purity of his motives and the sincerity of his passion.

And Cordelia did abate somewhat of her animosity to Langley, though she would have perished rather than admit she had been mistaken, or that he (or any other man) could be safely trusted with a woman's happiness.

'He certainly seems to love you, and be very devoted and all that—now,' she said; and then, after a moment's pause, 'but I believe all men make great professions before marriage. Wait until you have been married a few months, and then——'

'What, Cordelia?'

'You will know him better and like him less. But you won't confess it; they never do. Pride prevents them. You may depend upon it that if we only knew the truth, not one married woman in a thousand is really content with her lot.'

'You do admit a few exceptions, then?'

'There may be a few, though I am far from sure even of that. When a woman has no affection for her husband, and his devotion survives marriage, and there are no children, happiness is just possible—for his wife. Otherwise, I should say decidedly not.'

Ida laughed, being well pleased. She knew that her sister's bark was worse than her bite, her cynicism only skin-deep, and regarded it as a propitious sign that she was shifting her ground and objecting to Langley less because she disliked him personally than because she disliked the wicked sex to which he belonged.

'I know Rufus is a man, and that men were deceivers ever. All the same, I love him dearly, and trust him without reserve; and when you know him better, you will like him too—though I hope not too well,' added Ida mischievously.

'I like a man too well! Good heavens, girl! what are you thinking about? The idea!' exclaimed Cordelia indignantly.

With Mrs. Berners and the boys Langley had been a favourite from the first; the head of the firm and the family now treated him on the friendly footing of future kinship; and Robert, an easy-going old bachelor, who minded his business and liked a quiet life, fell promptly into line, asked the American to dinner, and gave him the run of his stables.

But Richard had a difficulty. Being rather a big man, a bank director, a member of the Dock Board, and a county magistrate, he wanted to make out to his friends that Ida's *fiancé* not only came of an old English family, but was a man of position in the country of his birth.

At length he had a happy thought. Langley had been giving the lads (who were never done pestering him for tales) an account of a brush with the Apaches.

'Who commanded the expedition?' asked Mr. Berners.

'Well, I guess I bossed the show that time.'

'You were the captain, in fact? Or was it colonel?'

'In a sense I was—for the time being. The boys generally called me captain.'

'Then, why not call yourself captain?'

'Partly because I never thought of it—and I had no regular commission, you know.'

'I don't think that matters much. Ship-masters have no commission, yet they always call themselves captain. Have you any objection to being called captain?'

'Not the least—if it pleases you,' said Langley, smiling.

It pleased him too. The brevet rank proposed to be conferred on him by Mr. Berners would help to hide his identity.

'You would describe yourselves as mounted infantry, I suppose?' asked the head of the family.

'Well, we fought either on horseback or on foot, according to circumstances; but we called ourselves rifle rangers.'

'Where of?'

'Most of the boys belonged to San Jacinto, I think.'

Mr. Berners made a memorandum; but, being ignorant of Spanish, he spelt San Jacinto as Langley had pronounced it.

In this way Langley got his promotion.

Mr. Berners also ascertained that though his future brother-in-law did not know in what county his father's kinsfolk lived, the name of their place was Woodlands. So it came to pass that when the marriage took place, the bridegroom figured in the rather pompous announcement which the bride's brother sent to the papers as Captain Langley, San Hasinto Rifle Rangers, and only son of the late Algernon Langley, of the Woodlands.

This pleased the gentleman in question hugely, it

was so delightfully vague. 'San Hasinto' might be anywhere, and was almost certainly nowhere; and there is hardly a parish in England that does not boast at least one Woodlands.

'If the Old Man and Juanita saw that in letters a foot long, they would be no wiser,' he reflected. 'My brother-in-law has bossed that job well.'

Which was that gentleman's own impression. He flattered himself that he had done an excellent stroke of business. Albeit he still entertained doubts about Langley, he had so managed matters that nobody would be able to say that Ida had married a nobody. When asked where San Jacinto was, he took care never to condescend to particulars. His invariable answer, given in his most off-hand manner, was:

'Oh, somewhere in the South—Texas or Florida, or one of these places,' which generally silenced his questioners, few of whom knew that Texas alone is twice as big as France. Maps are all very well, but if you want to form a right idea of the vastness of America, you must travel there.

A few days before the marriage, Mr. Berners received from his New Orleans correspondent an answer to the inquiry concerning the Langleys' antecedents—if it could be called an answer. It appeared that Langley had been introduced to Gibbins and Murk by Mr. Perfect, of the improved rifle, with whom Mr. Gibbins had a slight acquaintance. When Mr. Perfect suggested that, as Mr. Langley was going to Europe for the first time, it would be a great advantage for him to have a letter of introduction to Mr. Berners, Mr. Gibbins saw no objection to giving him one, and gave it accordingly.

As a matter of fact, however, Mr. Gibbins knew

nothing whatever of Mr. Langley, and, as might seem, very little about Mr. Perfect. He believed that gentleman was somewhere in the North, but he would make diligent inquiry, and so soon as he learnt anything definite, would let Mr. Berners know.

'Not very satisfactory,' was Mr. Berners' mental comment on this communication. 'He does not seem to have any friends—a bad sign that—and it looks as though we should never know more of his past than he chooses to tell us. Well, as things are, it is perhaps better so. If there is anything shady in it, and I got to know, others might get to know also, which would mean more scandal, and perhaps trouble for Ida. No news is good news, they say. Anyhow, it is well to think so sometimes. And, if you stir up muddy water, somebody is sure to get dirtied.'

Acting on which principle, Mr. Berners, like the worldly-wise man he was, wrote by the following mail to Gibbins and Murk, politely intimating that they need trouble themselves no further in the matter, he had obtained the required information from other quarters.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. MEACH AGAIN.

THE happy couple spent their honeymoon on the Continent, and Ida returned to Birdwood almost happier than she left it.

Young wives generally are well pleased with their husbands (it is a bad look-out when they are not). Mrs. Langley was enchanted with hers. He was so attentive and thoughtful, so lively and entertaining—so everything, in fact, that she thought herself the most fortunate of women.

One incident only—so trivial as to be scarcely worthy of mention—ruffled for a moment the sweet serenity of her happiness.

They were at Ems, the famous German spa and gambling place. Hemmed in by wooded heights, watered by a gentle stream, Ems is eminently picturesque, and at the height of the season, when the butterflies of fashion are flitting about in their gay attire, and Prussian officers promenading in resplendent uniforms, and the strains of military music are heard from morn till eve, the place is as bright and full of colour and movement as some festive scene in a grand

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opera. Mrs. Langley appreciated it keenly; the music, the blue sky, and the brilliant picture harmonized with her mood and heightened her happiness.

'How delightful!' she exclaimed. 'But,' lowering her voice, 'where is the gambling one hears so much about? None of these people look like gamblers.'

Ida had been brought up in the old-fashioned belief that gambling is one of the lowest forms of vice, and that gamesters are the most sordid of beings.

Her innocent query amused her husband greatly.

'All the same,' he said, laughing—'all the same, I dare say the greater part of them do gamble, and are come here for no other purpose. Let us go to the Casino and watch them for a while.'

Ida acquiesced, though with reluctance, for she had a feeling that it would not be quite right to look on while others did wrong.

The Casino was a fine building, with mirrored walls and gorgeously furnished rooms; and as they neared the one devoted to play, they could hear the low murmur of many voices, the clink of gold, and the monotonous cry of the croupiers:

'Faites votre jeux, messieurs—faites votre jeux!'

The tables were beset with a crowd of gamblers and lookers-on. Among the former were fine ladies, some gray-haired, others hardly out of their teens, several with rouleaux of louis d'or before them, which they staked with jewelled fingers, the hectic flush of unholy excitement on their cheeks, their eyes red with the lust of gold. And men—some playing for amusement or excitement, or in the mere wantonness of gilded youth; others, wary veterans of many campaigns, on a 'system,' and in the belief that by ingenious combinations they

could evade the law of probabilities and defy the rules of arithmetic.

'Make your play, gentlemen—make your play!' croaked the croupiers, in their queer monotone, as they raked in the yellow louis d'or and white thalers and five-franc pieces, for the luck was against the players, and the bank was winning 'all along the line.'

For a while Ida looked on the strange scene like one bewitched; then, with a sense of horror, and thinking that her husband was still near her, she whispered:

'How dreadful! Let us go, dear.'

'*Parfaitement, madame.* By all means, let us go,' says a fat blear-eyed old Frenchman, with pendulous cheeks and short white hair, standing on end.

Ida, turning away with a shudder, sees that her husband has pushed his way to the roulette table, and is staking a gold piece on one of the numbers. The wheel goes round, and when it stops the louis d'or becomes prize to the croupier's rake.

Langley has lost.

'Make your play, gentlemen—make your play!' repeats the croupier.

Langley puts seven louis on one number—seven—and the wheel is sent spinning again. Round and round goes the ivory ball, and, when the wheel stops, falls into seven, whereupon the gamblers exclaim loudly. Even the imperturbable croupier, as he hands over to the winner a bundle of banknotes and a pile of gold pieces, murmurs:

'*Je vous en félicite, monsieur.*'

Langley has won two hundred and fifty louis (two hundred pounds) at one stroke.

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As he takes possession of his gains, his wife touches his arm.

'Come away,' she says in an imploring voice. 'Come away, dear.'

Langley hesitated. He would fain have followed up his luck; but at the same moment he sees in the crowd a face he recognises—the face of Mr. James T. Meach; and having no particular wish to encounter that gentleman, responds to Ida's invitation with a cheerful alacrity that calms her perturbed spirit like a charm.

But he is too late. Meach has also seen him, and as Langley and his wife leave the Casino, he comes up, smiling and surprised.

'You here, Mr. Langley!' he exclaims. 'I'm delighted to meet you. I should have been real sorry to go back to America without seeing more of you.'

Langley could do no less than introduce Meach to Ida.

'I didn't know you were married,' quoth he.

'I was not, till about ten days since.'

'Oh, I must congratulate you, then! I wish you much happiness; you also, Mrs. Langley. I am greatly indebted to your husband. He saved my life—pulled me out of the Mississippi when the *Watersnake* burst up.'

'And you never told me, Rufus!' said Ida reproachfully, yet pleased to hear her husband praised, and proud to think that by his gallantry and address he had saved this gentleman's life.

'That was his modesty. And as we were not acquainted before, and have met only once since, I dare say the incident impressed him a good deal less deeply than it did me.'

'It wasn't a very difficult feat. We were very near the bank.'

'All the same, if you had not caught hold of me and held me up, the 'gators of the Mississippi would have made a meal of the remains of James T. Meach. I cannot swim a yard. . . . Been here long?'

'Only since yesterday.'

'I say, you made a fine haul just now. You are as lucky at roulette as you were——'

Langley made a slight yet significant grimace, which Meach, being himself a married man and ready of wit, rightly interpreted as a hint to make no further allusion to the game at poker and the excursion to Ascot.

'As lucky as you were in winning so fair a bride,' he added gallantly, whereupon, as was meet, the bride smiled graciously.

'You are right there, anyhow. I was indeed very fortunate. It was the best thing I ever did in my life. . . . My haul, as you call it, was the result of a sudden impulse. I had been watching the wheel go round, and seeing that the bank nearly always won, I felt a strong desire to try whether I could not make it disgorge some of its ill-gotten gains, and I somehow fancied that one might spot the right figure. I began by putting a louis on zero—and lost it. Then, remembering that seven was always considered a lucky number, I put seven on seven, and won a thousand dollars.'

'Why didn't you continue?'

'Well, perhaps I should if my wife had not reminded me, by touching me on the elbow, that I was gambling.'

'And then you dropped it—and quite right too. You were bound to lose if you had gone on. Anyhow, I am glad you got the better of the bank, and if I were you I would keep what I had won, and play no more this journey.'

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'I don't mean to. As I said just now, it was a sudden impulse to try whether I could take the shine out of the bank.'

This was highly satisfactory to Ida. She had a horror of play, and the scene in the Casino haunted her like the memory of a bad dream; but the fact of her husband having punished the bank by winning its money, coupled with his resolve to play no more, gave her almost as much pleasure as the sight of him gambling had given her pain.

Presently they met Mrs. Meach in the Casino garden, and accepted an invitation to dine with Mr. Meach and herself at their hotel, a courtesy which the Langleys reciprocated on the following day; and Ida, in the full belief that it would be agreeable to her husband, asked his friends to spend a day at Birdwood on their way (viâ Liverpool) to New York.

Politeness and policy constrained Langley to concur in this invitation, which was accepted with effusion; albeit the next best thing to not having met Mr. Meach was to see no more of him, and by coming to Birdwood he would not only learn where he lived, but whom he had married, and perhaps other things.

It was not that Langley disliked his countryman. Meach was a good fellow, and would doubtless do him a good turn if occasion should offer. But he was returning home, and though Uncle Sam has a wide domain, the world is small, destiny links men together by invisible threads, and the whirligig of time is apt to produce startling transformations.

Langley wanted to break with his past, and to keep from the knowledge of his wife and her connections what that past was. To meet an American was to

incur a risk, and though Meach knew nothing of his antecedents, it was conceivable that he might come across somebody who did, and that through him one of the two individuals he was most anxious to keep in the dark might discover his whereabouts. It would be no more singular a chance than his own meeting with Meach at Lime Street, and with Sol at Ascot.

Langley was a strange being. His nature was bizarre and his motives were mixed. He had good impulses—though not always—but no principles. Partly because for the moment he was sincerely desirous to turn over a new leaf, in part because he knew he was well off, he wanted to keep his present situation, and, above all, stand well with Ida, whom he really loved, and respected even more than he loved. Though he had no scruple about deceiving her, he would have been sorry to give her pain or forfeit her esteem. He knew that she regarded him as a hero, and meant to play the part and live up to the character as long as he might.

To most men such a position would be intolerable. Even though they could hypnotize their consciences, their lives would be a hell of apprehension and anxiety. But Langley had very little conscience to hypnotize, and he had encountered so many perils and undergone so many vicissitudes, his nerves were so firm and his spirits so buoyant, that, save when sharply reminded—as, for instance, by the encounter with the gipsy and the reappearance of Meach—that he was living on a quicksand, he could enjoy the present without reserve and think of the future without fear.

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CHAPTER IX.

AN UNWELCOME GUEST.

WHEN the Langleys returned from their wedding trip, Ida's husband settled down to the pleasant life of a country gentleman with a fair income and few responsibilities. This was a part to which he took kindly and played admirably. He bought, broke, and sold young horses, started a modest breeding stud, and set up a small menagerie, did a little fishing and shooting, and cultivated Robert Berners, who, albeit a poor shot and an indifferent rider, rather fancied himself as a sportsman, and being genial and unassuming, was a pleasanter companion than Richard, who, moreover, could neither shoot nor ride.

On the other hand, Langley seldom went to Liverpool; and though his wife suggested that it would be 'nice' for him to go occasionally to the reading-room and look at the American papers, and, perchance, meet some American acquaintance, he always gave Water Street a wide berth. Also when brother-in-law Richard asked him to the Manor House to meet some gentleman from New York or Boston, he generally pleaded a prior engagement.

Stranger still, considering the captain's fondness for

horses, he never went to a race meeting, not even to the Grand National, probably because he knew that if Sol were still in England, he was more likely to be met with at race meetings than anywhere else.

Ida, poor soul, ascribed her husband's avoidance of the turf to his love of home and sympathy with her dislike to whatever savoured of gambling.

But she had no objection to other forms of sport, and it was at her instance that Rufus took a hunting-box in the neighbourhood of Holmes Chapel, and sent thither three hunters (one of them warranted to 'carry a lady'). There they spent the greater part of the winter, and though Mrs. Langley did not often 'go out,' she generally accompanied her husband to the meets, weather and her health permitting.

Langley, who had ridden unbroken mustangs on the prairies of Texas and the llanos of Mexico, was not long in acquiring the art of riding to hounds, and after being out a few times, took a foremost place in the first flight, a distinction which, albeit very satisfactory both to Ida and himself, had an unexpected and undesired result.

One day the Cheshire hounds had a grand run—not the run of the season merely, but the run of many seasons. It was one of those mornings when everything is propitious for sport—the sky was cloudy, the wind southerly, the weather mild. Then a great dog fox was found at the first draw, and went away gallantly, with a defiant whisk of his white-tipped brush, speeded by an exhilarating blast of the huntsman's horn and a chorus of 'View hallos!' from the excited field.

'One moment, gentlemen—one moment! Give 'em a chance,' cried the master. 'Do give 'em a chance, if you please. Hold hard, you confounded idiot'—to a

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thrusting youngster. 'Don't you see that the hounds are not all out of covert? . . . Now, gallop like blazes, and catch 'em if you can.'

And they did gallop—two hundred horsemen, wildly exuberant, and going as though glory led the way, and they meant to do or die.

But the pace was too fast for the majority. In ten minutes a full half of them were left hopelessly in the rear. Yet another ten, and not more than fifty men had the hounds in view. Even these grew fewer, and soon the wake of the flying pack was dotted with fallen riders, riderless steeds, and a motley crowd of 'funkers' and stern chasers.

After a run of two hours, diversified by two or three slight checks, and a 'point' of fourteen miles, equal with détours to nearly twenty, the seven or eight survivors of the fray found themselves on the banks of the Dee, which the fox had crossed and into which the hounds had just plunged.

'Shall we follow them?' asked one, turning to his companions.

The proposal was not very inviting, for though the weather was mild, the water was cold and the current swift.

'I shall,' answered a stalwart young fellow, who rode for glory, and had been in front from the start. 'If we can get to that island—and it isn't far off—the rest will be easy;' and with that he dashed into the stream.

Langley went next, and having crossed many rivers more formidable than the Dee, he knew how to do it. So soon as his horse was in deep water, he slipped out of the saddle, and, holding by the mane with his left hand, swam with his right.

The others rode, and when they were within five or six yards of the island, it came to pass that the horse of one of them, a welter weight, went completely under, dismounting his rider, who, had not Langley grabbed and held him up by his coat-collar, would doubtless have been drowned.

When the seven reached dry land, four of them, who could not swim, wisely decided to stay where they were until they could be fetched off by a boat.

But Langley and two others braved the stream a second time, and, reaching the opposite bank safely, came up with the hounds a few minutes before they ran into their fox.

The run was too phenomenal to be lost to fame. Several descriptions of it appeared in the local papers, and one of the 'immortal seven,' as somebody styled them, having a gift for tall writing and a good deal of imagination, sent a glowing account to *Bell's Life*, wherein 'Captain Rufus Langley—a gentleman who had served with distinction in the irregular cavalry of the United States, and hunted wild buffaloes, and encountered still wilder Indians on their native plains—figured largely.'

In other circumstances, Langley—who, though reticent as to certain phases of his past life, did not always hide his light under a bushel—would have had no objection to seeing himself bepraised in print; but having good reasons for shunning publicity, he read his admirer's romance with rather mixed feelings.

'The irregular cavalry of the United States!' he said to himself, with a grim smile. 'That beats Brother Richard's San Hasinto Rifle Rangers. Well, they were irregular; there's no denying that—deucedly

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irregular. . . . I don't think it will get into any American papers. Not good enough. It wouldn't interest American readers. But if Sol sees it—and he's sure to be a reader of *Bell's Life*—if Sol sees it, I am very likely to see him, and then I suppose I shall have to stop his mouth somehow.'

Presently a frost set in, and Holmes Chapel being good for nothing but hunting, the Langleys returned to Birdwood, and Rufus amused himself with rabbit-shooting and other country pastimes.

When a full fortnight had elapsed since *Bell's Life* published its romance of the famous run, Langley began to think that Sol had missed seeing it, and even to hope that he was gone to the land of his adoption.

But the captain counted without his host.

One morning, as he was overhauling his ammunition, preparatory to a raid among the rabbits, the housemaid announced a visitor.

'Who is he?' asked Langley, as he snapped the lock of his piece.

'He looks very common, sir, and won't give his name.'

'I won't see him, Jane. Tell him so.'

The maid vanished, but in two minutes she was back again.

'His name is Mr. Solomon Stanley, s.r.,' said she.

'Did he say what his business was, Jane?' asked Langley, who was now occupied with his powder-flask.

'No, sir—only that he wanted to see you.'

'I suppose it must be business. Ask him—no, show him in right away, Jane. It will save trouble.'

Jane vanished a second time, and presently ushered in Mr. Solomon Stanley, whom she had rightly described as very common looking. In his hand he

carried a hat like a concertina, in the other an ash stick. He wore tight-fitting, much-patched cord trousers, and a shabby velveteen coat. His boots were down at heel and laced with twine; he had a black eye, and his naturally swarthy face was rendered still more swart by a beard of several days' growth.

'A deuced sight of difference between one Romany and another!' said he, throwing his hat on the floor and himself into a chair, and glancing at Langley, who was well groomed and daintily attired.

'I am not a Romany.'

'Shall we say *churdi* (mongrel) then?'

'I have a good mind to fire you out of the house!' exclaimed Langley furiously.

'I don't think you could do that, Rufus; and if you could you would not.'

'What do you want?'

'Money. I'm dead broke.'

'That's what you always say.'

'It is true this time, and no mistake. I started as a bookie——'

'And ended as a welsher, I suppose?'

'Well, I couldn't pay up—that's a fact. It was over that infernal Ebor Handicap. I say, that was a nice trick you played an old pal at Ascot. I have sought for you sorrowing ever since, and if I had not seen your name in *Bell's Life* I should have had to seek you longer.'

'Hang *Bell's Life*! How much?'

'To-day fifty sovereigns, and when I have got a new rig out and made myself presentable, I'll pay you another visit, and we can arrange for another subvention, paid quarterly in advance.'

'And if I refuse?'

'In that case, Rufus, I shall tell tales on both sides of the sea.'

'Which on this side, at least, would not be believed, and I should prosecute you for slander. We are not in Texas, remember.'

'That would hurt you more than it would hurt me. And I could make it very hot for you in more ways than one, as you well know. For instance, the lady as you call your wife——'

Langley started as though he had been stung, and a dangerous look came into his eyes.

'Silence, you scoundrel!' he hissed through his set teeth. 'She is my wife my honoured wife, and the best woman in the world' Now look here, Sol. You know me; I am easy-tempered up to a certain point—too easy—but when that point is passed I neither count risks nor value life; and if you say one disrespectful word about Mrs. Langley, I shall shoot you with as little compunction as I shot Tom Cantley when the boys mutinied in the Arroyo del Alamo.'

'Two can play at that game, I reckon,' muttered Sol sulkily. 'All the same, I meant no offence, and I only want a little help, which you can well afford. You are like a fighting-cock—you always fall on your feet. I don't.'

'Fifty pounds, you said?'

'That would keep me going for a week or two——'

'I don't run a bank. But I may have as much in the house. I'll see. Wait here till I come back.'

Sol was no sooner left to himself than he walked deliberately round the room, scanning every object it contained with curious interest, and making mental

comments on Rufus's extraordinary luck in lighting on such pleasant quarters.

One of the first things which caught the gipsy's eye was a handsome gold repeater, reposing in a velvet case on the mantelpiece, a present from Ida to her husband, and greatly valued by him. The watch was stopped, which probably accounted for its being where it was, instead of in Langley's pocket.

'By Jove, what a ticker!'—opening it. 'Jewelled in no end of holes, too! And appendages! Why, this chain and seal alone must be worth a matter of twenty quid. I wish they were mine. Rufus might make me a present of the lot and buy another for himself. I have half a mind—— He durst not make a row, though he does talk so big. I wonder whether it would fit my fob.'

The experiment was easy to try, and Sol tried it, with results satisfactory to his feelings. He had a weakness for jewellery and gems, and the sheen of the chain and seals as they dangled below his waistcoat pleased him mightily.

'Shall I?' he asked himself. 'Rufus would not miss it for an hour or two, and if he cut up rough I'd give it him back. To be or not to be, that is the question.'

Before Sol had time to make up his mind, and while he was still prowling round the room, his soliloquy was interrupted by the sound of Langley's returning footsteps, and as he could not restore the watch to its place without being caught in the act, he hastily put the chain out of sight and resumed his seat.

'I can give you thirty pounds in gold. If you want more, you must take it in the shape of a cheque,' said Langley, as he entered the room.

'No, thank you; I don't like cheques. The yellow metal will be enough to turn me into a *fino vesso* (fine gentleman), and then I shall pay you another visit and draw the balance—and a trifle besides, if you have no objection.'

'A hundred and your expenses if you'll make tracks for the West.'

'It cannot be done for the money, brother. Make the one a two, and add a cipher, and I'll think about it.'

'Give you two thousand, you mean? I'll see you hanged first. I haven't got as much; nor have you got the pull over me you think you have, Sol. You can prove nothing; nobody would believe you on your oath. If you slander me, I'll have you locked up. Even now I could prosecute you for trying to extort money by threats. But as we were pals, and you are of my mother's blood, I should be sorry to get you into trouble; also, as I frankly admit, it would be a worry, and, though it could do me no real harm, might set people talking, and annoy my wife. All the same, I will face that and more rather than be blackmailed, and have you continually coming here. Your next visit must be your last. Cross the sea, and I'll give you enough to set you up as a *geyengro* (horse dealer) on the other side. If that does not suit you, do your worst. And now you had better make tracks.'

With that Langley opened a door leading into the garden and showed Sol (who looked very surly, but made no answer) out of the house, and did not lose sight of him until he had left the grounds.

On his way back Langley fell in with his wife.

'Who is that horrid man, Rufus?' she asked.

'Did you see him?'

'I saw him come up the avenue, and Jane said he asked for you.'

'He is a man who has seen better days. I knew him slightly in America, and have given him a little help.'

'But he looks such a ruffian—just like a common tramp.'

'Naturally; he has tramped all the way from London, and slept out o' doors for a week or more.'

'Poor fellow! I'm so glad you helped him, dear. How did he lose his money?'

'On the turf, I think.'

'Gambling again! Oh, that dreadful turf! I'm so glad you never go to races, dear.'

'Rufus dear' (who was making a book on the Derby, through a betting agent) smiled as serenely as though the compliment had been well deserved.

'I thought you were going rabbit-shooting?' added Ida interrogatively.

'I meant to, but that man kept me so long that I doubt whether I could be back in time for luncheon'—looking at his watch. 'No, I cannot.'

'Why are you wearing your old watch?'

'Because the new one has come to a stop—something wrong with the works, I guess; I must have it looked to.'

'Where is it?'

'In its case on my mantelpiece. I'll tell you what: As it is so late, I'll give the rabbits a reprieve, and we will have a drive instead.'

'That would be very nice,' said Ida, with a pleased look.

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'Well, we will go round by the stable and tell Jim to get the phaeton ready. I want to try that little mare in harness I bought at Lucas's last week.'

After calling at the stable, loitering there a few minutes, and looking at the horses, they returned to the house, entering by the door of Langley's room.

When they were inside, Ida glanced at the mantelpiece.

'I don't see your watch, dear,' she said. 'Are you sure you put it there?'

'Quite, and not an hour since. Who can—— By Jove, I believe that ruffian has taken it!'

'The ungrateful wretch! After you had relieved him, too! It must be he. I don't think anybody else has been in the room. Let us inquire.'

Inquiry was made. Nobody had been in the room since Langley and Sol left it, and Jane distinctly remembered seeing the watch when she showed 'that man' in.

'What shall you do?' asked Ida of her husband.

Langley hardly knew what to do. The theft of the watch was so insolent and annoying that he had a burning desire to make the delinquent smart. If he did not resent this outrage, he might as well own himself beaten, and Sol for his master. On the other hand, Sol could make revelations which, though they might not be believed, would be unpleasant, and it was a safe rule to let sleeping dogs lie. Yet what would his wife say and think—what would others say and think—if he made no effort to recover his property and punish the thief?

He was between Scylla and Charybdis. Danger lurked in either course. But once in custody, Sol's

mouth would be practically closed. He could not clear himself by accusing another, and nobody would give heed to the vapourings of a gipsy vagabond under arrest for robbing his benefactor. And if he were sentenced to a term of penal servitude, so much the better.

'Better take the bull by the horns,' was Langley's conclusion.

'The phaeton will be round in a minute or two. We will drive right away to the county constabulary office, give information of the theft, and put the police on the thief's track,' said Langley to his wife. 'Go and put your things on. Plenty of wraps, mind. It's a chilly morning.'

The call was made, and the charge taken.

'All right, sir,' said the inspector, when he had entered the particulars. 'This is a very telling description you have given me, and as he has not much of a start, I dare say we shall be able to lag him before night. Just the sort of chap to go straight for the nearest station and make for Liverpool. Anyhow, we'll put the wires on him on the off chance.'

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CHAPTER X

SOL'S SENTENCE.

THE inspector's theory proved to be a good working hypothesis.

The wires were put on, and Sol was lagged as he stepped out of the train at Lime Street Station—to his unspeakable amazement and disgust.

'Rufus Junius prosecute me !' he exclaimed—' an old pal that's lived with him, and hunted with him, and fought with him, and—why, it's nothing to what he has done !'

To which one of the detectives who had laid hold of him answered grimly :

' It's not a question of what he has done, it's what you have done. Let us see whether you have got the ticker.'

' Here it is,' answered Sol, making a virtue of necessity. ' Take the darned thing, and let me go. I only borrowed it.'

' Tell that to the marines ; and it's my duty to tell you that whatever you say will be used in evidence against you.'

' So you won't let me go ?'

' Certainly not ; and it will be worth your while to come along quietly.'

Whereupon Sol, seeing that resistance would be useless, accompanied his captors without more ado, and spent the night in a cell, nursing his wrath and vowing vengeance.

The next morning he was taken to the police-court and confronted with his accuser.

Langley told a very straightforward tale—how the prisoner, whom he had known in America, had paid him an uninvited visit and asked for help; how he (Langley) had generously responded to the appeal, and how, shortly after the prisoner's departure, he missed the watch—which he identified as his property—found by the detectives on the prisoner's person.

Mrs. Langley, who appeared as a witness, also identified the watch.

Sol asked the prosecutor a question which set the court in a roar.

'Haven't you done worse things than borrow a friend's watch, Rufus Langley?'

'I am sure Mr. Langley never stole a watch,' observed the presiding magistrate. 'Even although he had stolen a score, it would make no difference to you. Two wrongs don't make one right. The case is complete. You are fully committed for trial. Next case, please.'

The incident naturally made somewhat of a sensation at Birdwood, and was the occasion of a good deal of slightly malicious gossip at the office in Water Street. The mere theft of a watch by a common tramp would have attracted little attention, but it seemed strange that the chief's brother-in-law should acknowledge previous acquaintance with a disreputable gipsy vagabond, receive him into his house, and make him a present—as he admitted at the examination—of thirty pounds.

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So at least thought Mr. Romaine, and as he had a lively curiosity, and no great liking for Langley, he took care to be present at the trial.

Meanwhile Sol had entrusted his defence to a solicitor named Trotter, with whom Romaine happened to be acquainted.

Trotter advised his client to plead guilty and throw himself on the mercy of the court.

'There is no question that you took the watch,' said he; 'and what is worse, we cannot, in the face of the evidence against us, deny it. All we can do is to get you let off with a light sentence, and that will best be done by pleading guilty. In which event, moreover, the prosecutor would probably not press the case against you.'

'Should I be able to ask him questions?'

'Not if you plead guilty.'

'Then I won't plead guilty; and as for the watch, I had as much right to it as he has. He got it under false pretences.'

Whereupon Sol told Mr. Trotter a tale which surprised him not a little, though, being a lawyer, and fully persuaded that, whatever Langley might be, his client was a blackguard, he naturally declined to believe it without strong corroborative evidence, which was not forthcoming.

'Besides, even though it were all proved, it would not help you in the least,' he told Sol; 'and unsupported insinuations against the prosecutor's character and good faith will hurt you more than it will hurt him.'

Nevertheless, Sol insisted on pleading not guilty, and instructed Mr. Trotter to retain counsel on his behalf.

So it came to pass that when Langley had given his

evidence in chief, Mr. Trounce, a rising young barrister, rose to cross-examine him.

'Are you quite sure, Mr. Langley,' he demanded— 'are you quite sure that you did not make the prisoner a present of the watch?'

'Quite. It was a present from my wife. Do you think——'

'It does not matter what I think, sir. And be good enough to remember, if you please, that the fact of my cross-examining you does not entitle you to cross-examine me. So you did not make the prisoner a present of the watch?'

'Certainly not.'

'But you gave him thirty pounds.'

'That does not prove that I gave him the watch.'

'It shows you might have done. Why did you give him thirty sovereigns?'

'Because he said he had been unfortunate on the turf, and I had known him in America.'

'In what part of America, may I ask?'

'In Texas, on the Mexican frontier, and in Mexico.'

'What were you doing there?'

'What has all this to do with the watch?' interrupted the judge testily. 'I confess I don't see.'

'I think you will find, my lord, that it bears on the witness's credibility.'

'That is quite within your right, of course; though I don't quite see—— However, go on. Answer the question, Mr. Langley.'

The interruption served Langley's turn. It gave him time to think how he should answer, and prepare for another question or two which Sol had probably suggested.

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'I ran a farm,' said he, 'raised cattle, clerked in a store, taught in a school, bought, sold, and broke horses, hunted buffaloes, bossed an expedition or two against wild Indians and marauding Mexicans, prospected for gold, and a few other things.'

'All at once?' asked Mr. Trounce, with a mocking intonation, which caused a titter.

'Not all at once,' replied the witness gravely.

'I must really compliment you on your versatility. You are quite a Jack-of-all-trades. The prisoner is a gipsy, I believe.'

'So do I.'

'Are you a gipsy?'

'No.'

'Was your father a gipsy?'

'No, sir; my father was an English gentleman.'

'Was your mother?'

'No, sir; she was an English lady.'

'You know what I mean. Was she a gipsy?' demanded Trounce sharply.

'Really, Brother Trounce,' interposed the judge, 'I don't see what the witness's mother has to do with his credibility.'

'Very well, I will not press the question. . . . Now, Mr. Langley, when you were in Mexico or Texas did you happen to know a lady of the name of Juanita?'

'I knew at least fifty ladies of that name.'

'Fifty! Why, what a gay Lothario you must have been!'

'Juanita is a Christian name, I believe,' observed the judge.

'Exactly, my lord. And when I tell you that I was in those parts several years, and that every other *niña*

you meet is called Juanita, it is evident that I cannot give a more precise answer.'

'I have it Juanita here, twice over,' said Mr. Trounce, referring rather sheepishly to his brief.

'And it's right. Didn't I tell that blooming idiot, Trotter?' broke in old Sol excitedly. 'Didn't I say ——'

But the judge bade him sternly to be silent, and Trounce resumed.

'I think you know quite well what Juanita is meant, Mr. Langley,' he observed. 'However, we will leave her for the present, and I will ask you another question. Did you ever know a person of the name of Lelong?'

'No.'

'It's a blasted lie—you did!' shouted Sol; 'and I——'

'Silence!' shouted the judge angrily. 'Let me tell you, prisoner, that if these unseemly interruptions are repeated, and you are found guilty, I shall regard them as an aggravation of your offence. Have you any more questions to ask the witness, Mr. Trounce?'

'No, my lord'—glancing indignantly at Sol. 'You may step down, Mr. Langley.'

The end of it was that the jury returned a verdict of guilty, in which the judge 'fully concurred,' and after observing on the style of defence which had been adopted on the prisoner's behalf, and presumably by his instructions, and dwelling on the heinousness of his offence—robbing a friend who had just rendered him a great service—sentenced the delinquent to two years' imprisonment, with hard labour.

'Well, what do you think of it all?' asked Romaine of Trotter, as they left the court-house in company.

'I think that Mr. Langley is both lucky and clever—'

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you saw how he humbugged Trounce—and that if the gipsy had taken my advice, and pleaded guilty, he would have got off with one year's confinement instead of two years' hard. Also that when he has done his time, Mr. Langley had better look out for squalls.'

'But do you think there is anything in Stanley's allegations—what you were telling me?'

'I begin to think there may be. I judge from Langley's answers, and the manner of them. He was just a little too clever. And Trounce had a difficult part to play, rendered still more difficult by the prisoner's interruptions. He could not, of course, make statements to the prosecutor's detriment; he could only ask him suggestive questions, and Langley was too wide-awake to be entrapped into making damaging admissions.'

'All the same, it is conceivable that there may be some basis of truth in the gipsy's tale to you.'

'Conceivable, certainly, yet very doubtful. We have only his word for it, and I should be sorry to hang a dog on Mr. Solomon Stanley's evidence.'

'It would not be advisable to say anything, then?'

'Outside? Not for the world. A lawyer should be as close as an oyster. I have told you only because you are an old friend and know the parties—of course, in strict confidence. And neither of us wants to be sued for slander.'

'True; and I have another motive for keeping a still tongue. Langley is connected with the family, the family is the firm, and as I hope some day to be a partner, you may be sure that I shall not raise unpleasant questions. People like Berners Brothers don't want to be mixed up in a scandal.'

He thought that Trotter had disclosed all that Sol had imparted to him. This was a mistake. Several of the gipsy's statements seemed so far-fetched and absurd that Trotter set them down as malignant inventions, too absurd and incredible to be retold even to a friend.

Yet what Romaine had heard made so deep an impression on his mind that when he got home he wrote out a full account of the trial and the circumstances in which it originated—so far as they were known to him. Like the other story, however, it was incomplete—the *dénouement* was with the future ; for which reason he concluded, as on a previous occasion, with the words, 'To be continued.'

Being thus reminded of the affair of the stolen bonds, he took it into his head to look over his narrative of that remarkable episode in the history of the house, some of whose minor details were beginning to fade from his memory.

After he had read a few minutes, he dropped his manuscript on the floor, dashed his fist on the table, and shouted 'By Jove !' Then he picked up his manuscript and looked at it again.

'Queer, very' he said to himself. 'Lelong was the name of the clerk who disappeared from the Suburban Company's office about the time of the robbery ; and at the trial the gipsy asked Langley whether he ever knew anybody of that name. A coincidence ? Possibly. All the same, I should like to know. I should like to have half an hour's talk with Solomon Stanley—afraid I cannot, though, till his time is up. I suppose he will be out in eighteen months or so. I must ascertain. And if there is any connection—it is utterly incredible,

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of course ; still, strange things sometimes do happen—I shall say nothing to anybody, not even to Trotter. It would be too awful. All the same, if the chief learns that I am in possession of facts which, if disclosed, would make the most frightful scandal ever known in Liverpool, I don't think I shall have to ask twice for an interest in the business.'

As to Langley, he was fairly content, though not fully satisfied, with the result of the trial.

Thanks to Sol's interruptions, the judge's interpositions, and his own alertness and good luck, he had passed through the ordeal unscathed.

Nothing had come out which could injure him in the estimation of his wife or his friends, or throw a light on those parts of his past life which it was his interest as well as his desire to bury in oblivion.

He could form a pretty shrewd guess as to what Sol had said to his solicitor, but from the hesitating, confused way in which Trounce questioned him inferred that the lawyers did not credit the gipsy's statements, and he knew that they would not venture to repeat slanderous charges on the sole authority of a convicted felon.

So far, well. But he would have been easier in his mind if Sol had got five years' penal servitude or been sent for a term to Western Australia (whither convicts were still occasionally transported). Two years, if the gipsy behaved himself, meant little more than eighteen months, and Langley feared that his first thought on being set free would be revenge—a revenge not to be slacked by telling tales and levying blackmail.

An ancient comrade converted into a foe is the most dangerous of enemies.

Against this peril Langley would have to guard as best he might. 'Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof.' A great many things might happen before Sol had done his time; also it was a comfort to think that the same measure was meted out to murderers in England as to horse-thieves in Texas, and that the gipsy knew it.

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CHAPTER XI.

FEARS.

BEFORE long Langley had something pleasanter to think about than his quondam satellite and companion, and for a while ceased worrying about him.

Mrs. Langley became the mother of a little girl, and Birdwood was *en fête*.

The child was christened Irene, after Ida's own mother, and to the christening came Cordelia, bringing with her a fine present ; and she so far forgot herself and her distrust of men in general, and Langley in particular, as to offer him her cheek for a brotherly salute, and warmly felicitate him on becoming the father of 'such a sweet little girl.'

Sweet beyond a doubt, also undoubtedly little, and Langley was very proud of her, and delighted that Ida was doing well, yet somewhat saddened withal.

More than ever he wished that he could blot out the past, and do away with the Damocles sword which, albeit his sanguine temperament enabled him to disregard it, might at any moment fall, to the destruction of his happiness and Ida's peace.

This was a possibility which he could not always ignore, which, indeed, now that he had given a new



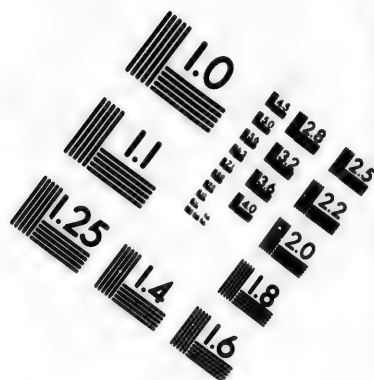
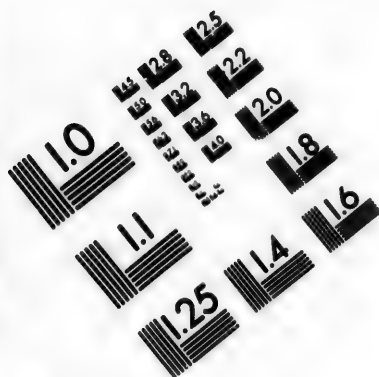
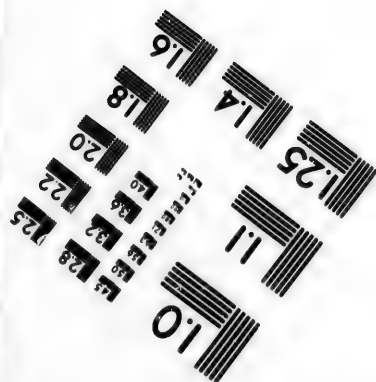
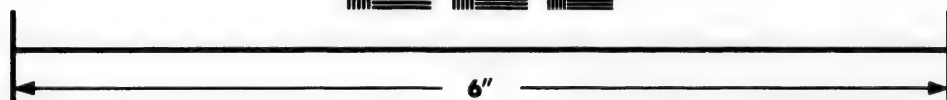
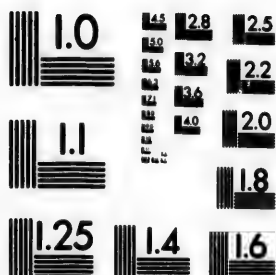


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hostage to fortune, weighed more on his mind than ever.

Langley thought that these were symptoms of waning courage and a weakening will. Really they were signs of moral development. His better nature, which had become almost atrophied from disuse, was gaining new strength, and *pari passu* the bad tendencies which he had inherited from his mother were losing ground.

All this Langley owed to the influence of his wife. If evil communications corrupt good manners, it is no less true that continual association with a noble nature makes for goodness. There was no danger of Ida sinking towards his level, for she believed in him thoroughly—her only weakness—and imputed to him every manly virtue; while he on his part strove strenuously to appear worthy of her love and hide from her his questionable antecedents.

Though once an ardent gambler, he had renounced gambling, lest she should find him out and be made unhappy thereby; and for the same reason, albeit no longer restrained by the fear of meeting Sol, he still kept away from race meetings.

There were even times when he seriously asked himself whether it was quite fair to keep Ida in the dark as to his doings in the past and his fears for the future.

But though Langley had ceased, for the time, to be a reprobate, he had not become a paragon. If he revealed himself in his true colours, Ida might still love him after a fashion, but worship, or even respect him, she could not. Her idol would be overthrown, her home broken up, her life made wretched. Better continual deception and the Damocles sword than so dire a consummation.

She might never learn the worst—and, as it fell out, she never did. Save for one anxiety—of which more presently—her married life was not darkened by a single cloud, and she never suspected that her husband did not possess all the high attributes with which her fond imagination had endowed him.

Irene became the centre of their lives. She was a wonderfully pretty child, with large, dark eyes, reddish-brown hair, and pink cheeks, and it would have been hard to decide which of her parents was the more dotingly fond of her.

Yet sometimes, when the father was tossing the helpless little thing in his arms, and she laughed and crowed with delight, there would flash across his mental vision some scene of long ago in which he had borne a part—a scene of rapine, violence and bloodshed—and he could hardly believe himself to be the same man. It seemed a hideous dream, as though it had happened in a previous existence or an imaginary world.

And then he would kiss the child passionately, shuddering, and ask himself whether it was possible for a man to cut himself loose from his past, and evade, even in this world, the punishment of evil deeds.

But Langley had neither a neurotic temperament nor a brooding mind; and as the weeks went by and nothing ominous befell, his spirits gradually recovered their tone, and, acting on the principle of not meeting trouble half-way, he cast care behind him and let the world wag.

For a while!

Not least among the happier incidents of Langley's lot was the place where he lived. If a thing of beauty is a joy for ever, so must be a picturesque dwelling-house 'all in a garden fair.'

The Cottage was long and low, built of red sandstone mellowed with age, and dight with many windows framed in luxuriant ivy, which clustered round the chimneys and drooped from the eaves.

Up the sides of the quaint old porch climbed a yellow *canariensis* and a purple-flowered clematis; and masses of red and white roses trailed up the front and hung in graceful abandonment over the door.

Before the house stretched a spacious lawn—to the eye as green as though it were paved with emeralds, to the tread as soft and elastic as a carpet woven in Turkish looms—adorned with verdant shrubs and bordered with radiant flower-beds.

Here, one fine afternoon in the fall of the year, the Langleys were whiling away an hour of idleness—unless sitting in a shady nook and contemplating the contortions of a baby on a rug can be regarded as a sort of work.

‘Don’t let her go on the grass, Rufus,’ cried the watchful mother; ‘she might catch cold. Pull her back on the rug. Take her on your knee? No; I want her to roll about. They say it is well for babies to roll and kick and scream. It is good for their lungs and limbs. Isn’t she a little darling? Did you ever see as pretty a baby in America, Rufus?’

‘Nor anywhere else. There isn’t her equal in the two hemispheres.’

‘I am sure there is not. Just fancy! She will be ten months old to-morrow. Everybody says she will walk by the time she is a year old—she has such sturdy legs, and offers so well.’

‘Ten months! How time flies! It seems only the other day.’

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'Yes, time flies; and the happier you are the faster it seems to go, don't you think, dear? And yet, somehow, I feel like an old married woman—as though we had been married years instead of not quite two. . . . They all approve of you now, I think, Rufus. Cordelia does, I know. She said so in almost as many words when she was here. Poor Cordelia! I wish she was as happily married as I am. . . . Now, will you keep an eye on baby while I glance at the *Mercury*? I never get a minute to myself either for reading or anything else. It takes all my time to look after you and Irene.'

'For which Irene and I are truly grateful, aren't we, Irene? All right; go on with your reading, and I will keep watch and ward over our little woman.'

Langley lighted a cigar, and, while he smoked, pensively regarded the gambols of his daughter as she scrambled over the rug or played with one of the toys that lay ready to her hand.

Something had jarred. The reference to Irene's age and the flight of time reminded him *malgré lui* that Sol's time was nominally more than half up, and might, and probably would, terminate in a few months.

What shape would the gipsy's vengeance take? Down south or out west Langley would have recked nothing though twenty Sols or twice as many Apaches had been thirsting for his blood. He could take care of himself. But the thought of home and wife and family, which sometimes makes poltroons in spirit heroes in action, may make brave men cowards in apprehension.

Langley trembled for his wife and child.

'What if——'

It was a new and appalling idea. He had heard

stories of gipsies stealing children, and though he did not believe them, anything was possible, and if Sol or — desired vengeance, they might steal his darling, and make Ida's life and his own for ever wretched.

The thought was madness. He snatched the child to his arms and kissed her passionately.

'You foolish father!' said Ida, looking up from her paper with a gratified smile. 'Couldn't you let her play? Do you know, dear, I am afraid that when she gets older you will spoil her dreadfully.'

'And you?'

'Oh, if you spoil her, I shall have to play the part of stern parent, and keep you both in order. . . . Oh, here is something that will interest you'—excitedly, as she resumed her reading. 'They have released that man Solomon Stanley.'

'What?'

'They have let him go.'

'Impossible! He has only served half his time.'

'He has got a remission. Listen.'

Ida read a paragraph to the effect that Solomon Stanley, who some time previously was convicted at Liverpool and sentenced to two years' imprisonment, with hard labour, for stealing a watch from Mr. Rufus Langley, of Birdwood, had been sent to Chatham to work in a chain gang. His conduct being good, some indulgences were allowed him, and accidentally discovering that certain of the convicts under long sentences were engaged in a plot to escape, which would have involved the murder of a warder, he gave such information to the authorities as enabled them to nip the conspiracy in the bud and deal out exemplary punishment to the delinquents. These facts were duly re-

ported to the Home Secretary, who thereupon remitted the remainder of Stanley's sentence, and ordered him to be discharged, with a gratuity.

'He is not such a bad man, after all, or he would not have behaved so well,' observed Ida.

'Not a bad man? You don't know,' returned Langley gloomily. 'As likely as not he wormed himself into the confidence of those plotters and then betrayed them, or he may have acted as what the French call an *agent provocateur*. That mention of good behaviour and indulgence is unquestionably suggestive of something of the sort.'

'What a dreadful man! I cannot understand why you befriended him, Rufus.'

An embarrassing question, but Rufus was equal to the emergency.

'Because Sol is a dreadful—or, rather, a dangerous man,' he answered, after a moment's hesitation. 'I wanted to get him out of the country, and hoped he would use the money I gave him to pay his passage to America.'

'Perhaps he may go now. He will have some of that money left, and with the gratuity—— Do you think he will call on you again?'

'No, I don't think Sol is likely to come here any more.'

All the same, Langley was not very sure about it, and the apprehension he had just conceived took such hold of him that he seldom stirred from the house or the grounds, and when Irene was taken out for an airing or a drive in the pony-cart, always went with her, which naturally excited his wife's curiosity.

'What is the matter, Rufus?' she asked. 'You have not been the same the last few days. You look

concerned, and it seems as though you could not bear baby to be out of your sight. Won't you tell me what it is, dear ?'

Whereupon, not being ready with a sufficiently plausible evasion, and thinking that if she had an inkling of what was passing in his mind she might help him 'o guard against the danger which he feared, he gave her a hint.

'Stanley is very revengeful,' he said, 'and I don't think he will ever forgive me for having him locked up.' This was enough for Ida.

'And Sol is a gipsy, and gipsies steal children,' she cried. 'Oh, Rufus, what shall we do ?'

Her distress was so great that Langley tried to pacify her by making light of the danger which he had suggested and so much dreaded.

'Gipsies don't steal children,' he said. 'Why should they? They have plenty of their own. I am over-anxious—actually getting nervous; and when you come to think about it, Sol is the last man in the world to carry off a baby, though he does hate me.'

'The wretch might wreak his vengeance on you, and that would be worse. Let us go away somewhere—abroad—for the winter.'

Langley had no objection. In fact, it was what he most desired, though he had not liked to say so, apropos to nothing in particular.

After some further conversation it was agreed that a fortnight later, which would bring them to the middle of October, they should start, with bag, baggage, baby and nurse, for the South of France, and stay until the following spring, by which time Ida hoped, and Rufus said he felt sure, Sol would be far enough and the danger past.

CHAPTER XII.

IDA'S LAST DRIVE.

THE resolve to go abroad was hardly taken when Langley tried to make believe, and to persuade his wife, that they were acting hastily, and that at any rate there was no need for hurry.

'Sol is no fool,' he urged. 'He knows that England is not Mexico, and that if he plays any tricks the law will lay hold of him.'

This, not from infirmity of purpose, but because he really began to think that his fears were exaggerated, and to feel somewhat ashamed of his nervousness.

But Ida had made up her mind.

'I am sure you would not fear for Irene without good cause,' said she; 'and you are only trying to make the best of it out of consideration for me. You say yourself that Stanley is revengeful. We know that he is unscrupulous. I shall not have a moment's peace till we are away from Birdwood.'

And she hurried on with her preparations for departure.

Meanwhile, baby and her nurse were not allowed to leave the grounds without being accompanied either by

the child's father or a man-servant, and followed by Pluto, a gigantic mastiff. Also Ida made her husband promise not to go out after dark, and she insisted that even by day he should carry a pistol in his pocket and a thick stick in his hand.

'I do not mean to lose either you or baby,' she would say. 'I shall not let you run the slightest risk, and it is only for a short time.'

To a man who had lived in the most lawless regions of America, and had been made a target of oftener than he could remember, these precautions seemed slightly absurd. Nevertheless, he submitted with a good grace, for he himself had sounded the alarm, and, as Ida had remarked, it was only for a short time.

Their preparations were all made, and they were to leave on the morrow.

The time was mid-October, and though winter was nigh, and the leaves were beginning to fall, and the hedgerows to look bare and grim, the autumn still lingered and the weather was fine and mild—so fine that Ida proposed that they should take a drive, for the last time before leaving England.

'Baby is safe in her cot,' she said. 'We need not go far, and we shall be back before dark.'

So the phaeton was brought round, and they set out and had a pleasant time, and when the sun went down behind the Welsh hills, drove slowly homeward in the hushed twilight, through pleasant country lanes which ran between grassy banks topped with brambles, blackberry bushes, and blackthorn.

'Where shall we be at this time to-morrow?' asked Ida of her husband.

'In London, I suppose, and the day after at Paris.'

'I am glad we are going, yet sorry to go. Do you understand the feeling, Rufus?'

'Perfectly. It goes against the grain to quit a place to which you are attached, and where you have been happy.'

'And you have been happy at Birdwood?'

'Very.'

'So have I—always; lately very happy. Oh, I have much to be thankful for. I should have much to be thankful for even though this were to be my last day on earth. I had a happy girlhood, and a good father, who left me well off; and now I have a good husband, who is all in all to me, and the dearest little girl in the world, and I am happier than ever'—laying her hand lovingly on his arm.

Langley was deeply touched. These loving words, all this tenderness and devotion, which he had done so little to deserve, made him feel his unworthiness more than he had ever felt it before, and he trembled as he thought of the confidence he had so much abused, and the treacherous quicksand on which Ida's happiness was built. And yet it was good to know that, so far, he had made her happy.

'You don't know,' he said slowly. 'I am not so good as you think. I fear I am not good at all. No man can be as good as a good woman. It isn't in us.'

'At any rate, dear, you have been good to me, and if it is the last word I say——'

'My God! what is that?'

A flash of fire from the hedge, the hissing of a bullet through the air, and as the horse plunged forward in a mad gallop, Ida threw up her arms, and then, with a wild cry of anguish and terror, sank down on her seat!

As soon as Langley succeeded in pulling up the terrified horse, he put his arms round his wife, raised her up, and looked in her face.

'Are you much hurt?' he asked, kissing her passionately. 'Speak to me, darling—oh, speak to me!'

But Ida, deadly pale and quite unconscious, answered nothing.

'She is hurt—perhaps to death! That shot was meant for me, and if she dies she will die for me. Would to heaven I might have atoned for the wrong I have done her by dying for her! . . . Home—home! She may only have swooned. Go, horse!'

In less than ten minutes Langley was at the Cottage, and after he had carried his still inanimate wife tenderly to her room, sent for a doctor and a constable.

'Sol shall swing for this,' he muttered fiercely to himself; 'and if she dies, and justice fails, I will hunt him to the uttermost parts of the earth!'

The doctor came quickly, but even before he arrived Ida had ceased to live. The bullet had pierced her side and inflicted a mortal wound.

It was a terrible blow for Langley. He had lost more than a wife—a guardian angel whose sweet temper and benign influence might in time have completed that moral transformation of his character which, beginning with their marriage, had since continued without surcease.

But his loss was her gain, in the sense that sooner or later she must have learnt what would have wrung her soul with anguish, and might well have turned her brain; and her married life had been happy, and she believed in her husband to the last.

This was his consolation when the sharpness of his grief began to abate and he had leisure for thought.

As yet, however, that time was not come. The brothers and Richard's wife, summoned in hot haste, and wild with horror and grief, were at the Cottage; servants, half out of their wits, were running to and fro, and an inspector of police was eagerly demanding whatever information Langley or anybody else might be able to give him.

He made no secret of his belief that the gipsy was the murderer.

'I know him for a man of revengeful disposition,' he said. 'He owed me a grudge for prosecuting him. When I heard that he had been set at liberty, I felt sure he would try to do me an ill turn, and so I told Mrs. Langley. She feared that, being a gipsy, he would make an attempt to kidnap our little girl. It was mainly for that reason that we were going abroad.'

'Why didn't you tell us, and we would have kept a look out for the villain? You might have had the house and yourself placed under police protection.'

'Yes; why didn't you inform the police?' asked Mr. Berners.

Langley could only say that he had not thought of it; that he did not even know that he might claim police protection.

'Pity you did not. If you had, this frightful calamity might have been prevented. It is the very first thing I should have done,' added his brother-in-law severely.

'You think, then, the man meant to kill you?' inquired the inspector.

'I am sure. He had nothing against my wife; and

if she had not chanced to lean a little forward at the very moment the shot was fired, I should have been hit instead of her.'

'As a matter of fact, then, my poor sister saved your life by the sacrifice of her own?'

'It is so,' answered Langley, in a broken voice. 'I wish to Heaven it had been otherwise.'

'So do I,' thought Mr. Berners.

His heart was full of sorrow and bitterness. He had loved Ida dearly; and if this man, whom he had never really liked, and of whom nobody knew anything, had not come amongst them, this awful calamity would not have happened.

'It is a strange affair,' observed the inspector reflectively. 'I never had a case of cold-blooded murder out of revenge before. . . . We have had no suspicious characters about, except tramps and bogus sailors. This gipsy might have got himself up as a sailor.'

'Very likely.'

'Well, all that I can do to-night is to communicate with Liverpool and all the police-stations in the neighbourhood, and send out descriptions of the supposed murderer. In the morning we will scour the country and examine the ground. The villain cannot be far off.'

'I will give a reward of two hundred pounds for his apprehension,' said Mr. Berners.

'And I as much more,' added Langley.

The inspector remarked that this also should be made known—it would put the police on their mettle—and that the Government would probably offer a reward as well, and then went his way.

CHAPTER XIII.

ON A WRONG SCENT.

'THE Birdwood Tragedy,' as the papers called it, made an immense sensation not only in Liverpool, but throughout the country.

It is in the nature of things for dramatic murders, with a touch of mystery and revenge for their supposed motive, to excite widespread interest, especially when those concerned are people of some position and belong to a family so well known as the Berners. Liverpool folk talked about little else, and Birdwood was beset with reporters intent on learning the latest news and gathering materials for realistic descriptions of the scene of the tragedy and the home of the victim.

Also, the bereaved husband came in for a good deal of attention, and as he declined to be interviewed, and nobody knew much about him, purveyors of news were obliged to draw on their imaginations, and the few facts disclosed at Stanley's trial, for the interesting sketches of Captain Langley's career with which they fed the curiosity of their readers.

Meanwhile, the police were prosecuting their inquiries and looking for Stanley.

Some significant facts came to light.

On the morrow of the murder a rifle with a foul barrel, a knife, and part of a newspaper were found near the scene of the crime, and as the calibre of the piece corresponded with the fatal bullet, there could be no question that it was the weapon with which Mrs. Langley was killed.

It had doubtless been left behind purposely, while the knife had presumably either slipped from the murderer's pocket as he lay on the ground, or been dropped in his flight.

The rifle bore the Birmingham proof-mark, a number, and the name of a well-known London gunmaker, who, on consulting his books, found that he had sold it, two or three years previously, to a customer whose address he gave. This gentleman had sold it to somebody else, and it was finally traced to a pawnbroker in the city, who had sold it as an unredeemed pledge to another body, whose name he did not know and whose appearance his shopman was unable to describe. All he could say was that, to the best of his recollection, the buyer looked respectable, and, unless he was mistaken, spoke with a foreign accent; but not being learned in foreign tongues he would not express an opinion as to whether it was a French or German accent, or what else.

So the rifle neither told a tale nor furnished a clue.

There remained the knife and the piece of paper.

The knife, broad-bladed and towards the point double-edged, as might seem of Spanish make, since on one side were engraved the words *Guerra al Cuchillo* (War to the knife), and on the other a monogram, 'I.H.S.' It opened with a clasp, and could not be shut without touching a spring, and would serve admir-

ably either as hunting-knife or dagger. The haft also contained a corkscrew and a picker.

Whether the monogram was somebody's initials or a religious emblem could not be determined; but as a religious emblem associated with a motto so murderous as *Guerra al Cuchillo* would be very much out of place, it was presumed that the 'I.H.S.' stood for the original owner's name.

But as the police could neither hear aught of him nor of anybody else to whom the knife had belonged, it led to nothing.

The bit of paper was the mutilated page of an American weekly journal, part of whose title was *Eagle*—what *Eagle* or where published, there was nothing to show, and the date was missing.

But as the soiled fragment of a newspaper cannot easily be identified, and may have belonged to anybody, the police did not hope much from this *pièce de conviction*.

A strange feature of the case was the murderer's choice of a lurking place, and the knowledge, or, rather, foreknowledge, of Langley's movements which it implied. It could hardly be on the off-chance of his victim passing that way that he took post where he did. He must have had some inkling of Langley's proposed drive, and yet Langley averred that fifteen minutes before they set out neither he nor his wife had so much as thought of going, and they could not, of course, have mentioned to anybody in the house an intention which did not yet exist.

The only hypothesis which fitted the facts was that the murderer, having seen Mr. and Mrs. Langley drive through the lodge gates, and guessing from the way

they went the road by which they would return, had anbushed himself in the lane.

This theory was suggested, and in part confirmed, by the evidence of the gardener's wife who acted as lodge gatekeeper. A man was standing on the opposite side of the road as the carriage went past, and presently followed it. Also, a man very like him, if not the same, had asked her a day or two before to whom the place belonged, whether the master was at home, and if she thought there was any likelihood of his getting a job of work.

To which the lodge gatekeeper answered that, as the master and mistress were going to foreign parts, she did not think there was the least likelihood of his getting a job. Whereupon, after asking a few more questions, he went on his way.

All the description she could give of him was that he looked like a labouring man on the tramp, was civil-spoken, and did not talk like one belonging to that part of the country.

It also appeared that a man, who might be—and probably was—the same, had called at the village ale-house, and as he drank his glass of ale and ate his cheese and bread, asked, 'as if nowt wor' (with seeming indifference), several questions about the resident gentry in general and Langley in particular. Moreover, he 'talked fine,' which meant that he did not speak the local patois.

As touching his appearance, the landlady could add very little to the vague description given by the lodge gatekeeper; she did not consider it good manners to stare at her customers, and had not observed whether he was dark or fair. All the same, she thought that

if she saw the man again she should be able to 'tell him.'

In one point only were the two women clear. The man was weaponless—had not even a stick. On the other hand, he was a biggish chap, and a biggish chap with roomy garments could easily hide about his person the stock and barrel of a light rifle. All this, though quite compatible with the theory of Stanley being the murderer, lacked precision, and it would require something much more positive than Langley's belief that Stanley was the man to insure his conviction, or even have him committed for trial.

As yet, however, although a fortnight had elapsed since the murder, and the Government had doubled the reward offered by Langley and Mr. Berners, and the hue and cry had been raised all over the country, Sol was uncaught.

Probably, as afterwards appeared, because he had not tried to escape. If you would be safe from pursuit, don't run away; and if you would avoid the polite attentions of a 'shadowing' detective, never look behind you.

In the end Stanley was unearthed by the Press, which has indirectly effected so many important captures. The police had really very little hand in it, except to take him up when he was pointed out to them.

This was the way of it.

At that time there lived at Mugby (in the Midlands) an intelligent barber of the name of Stubbs, who read diligently the daily papers, and took great interest in the Birdwood tragedy.

Now, barbers, as all know who have been in their

clutches, have unequalled opportunities for studying the human countenance. While they lather a man's face they can note the shape of his head, the colour of his hair and eyes, the contour of his nose; and as they scrape his chin they may estimate the size of his chaps and the character of his mouth—if it happen to have any character.

When an observant barber has shaved you once or twice he is likely to know you again.

One day a man dropped into this particular barber's shop, and, dropping into a chair, said 'Shave'—neither more nor less.

He had black eyes, a swarthy skin, big jaws, and a beard like pin-wire, which turned the edge of Stubbs' best razor, and greatly annoyed the barber by turning a deaf ear to his remarks about the weather.

Moreover, when Mr. Stubbs, drawing certain inferences from the make of his customer's clothes, observed, affably and interrogatively, 'In the horse line, I suppose, sir?' all he got for an answer was, 'What the devil is that to you?'

When the shave was done, the stranger wiped his chin, paid his penny, and, as Mr. Stubbs forcibly remarked to his assistant, 'walked his chinks' without so much as saying good-day.

Obviously not a man to be forgotten.

At irregular intervals he paid several other visits to Mr. Stubbs, always behaving in the same eccentric fashion.

Meantime occurred the Birdwood tragedy, and it struck the barber that his queer customer was uncommonly like Solomon Stanley, as described by the papers; also that it would be a fine thing to earn the

eight hundred pounds reward offered for the murderer's apprehension and conviction.

'As much,' he reflected (being clever at figures), 'as by shaving one hundred and ninety-two thousand customers at a penny a piece, and no wear and tear of razor and brushes and waste of lather.'

But it was necessary to proceed with caution. Solomon Stanley was not the only powerfully-built, middle-sized man in the world, of a gipsy cast of countenance, and aged thirty-two, or thereabouts.

A mistake would not merely, as he thought, render him liable to an action at law, but expose him to unpleasant attentions on the part of his queer customer, and the barber was not conspicuous for personal courage.

If he could only find out the man's name! After much pondering, Mr. Stubbs bethought him of a plan whereby, as he thought, this might be done without any great risk.

The next time the queer customer came to be shaved, and he had him by the nose, and therefore at advantage, morally and physically, Mr. Stubbs abruptly observed:

'I wonder whether you are anyways related to a man I used to know—Solomon Stanley? You are uncommonly like him.'

The effect was startling.

The queer customer sprang to his feet, overturned his chair, and, reckless of the razor, dashed Mr. Stubbs' arm aside.

'You are a thundering liar!' he exclaimed. 'You never knew Solomon Stanley in your life. I am the man.'

'Don't come near me—don't come near me!' cried the barber, retreating to a corner, and flourishing his razor. 'If you come near me I'll—I'll do you a mischief—I'll slice your nose off.'

'Slice your own off, you fool, and you'll have a pimple the less! I never saw such a snout in my life!' returned Sol scornfully, as he rubbed his chin with the jack-towel.

Mr. Stubbs was not proud of his nose—it was little and red—but to hear it stigmatized as a pimple and a snout was really too exasperating, and made him almost speechless with rage.

'You are a ruffian,' he gasped—'a ruffian and a murderer; and I'll have you laid by the heels, mark me if I don't!'

The gipsy laughed disdainfully, threw a penny on the floor, and went.

Mr. Stubbs tore off his apron, put on his hat, and followed at a respectful distance. Spying a policeman on the opposite side of the street, he ran up to him, in a state of great excitement.

'That is Solomon Stanley, the murderer of Mrs. Langley!' he exclaimed. 'Arrest him, and please to take notice that I claim the reward.'

'All right! Come along,' said the bobby; and the next moment he laid his hand on the gipsy's shoulder.

'Is your name Solomon Stanley?' he asked.

'What the blazes is that to you?' answered Sol, wheeling round.

'A good deal. You will please to consider yourself my prisoner.'

'I'll be hanged if I will;' and with that Sol shook himself loose and ran for it, only, however, to run into

the arms of another constable, who just then whipped round the street corner.

In these circumstances there was nothing for it but to surrender at discretion.

'What am I wanted for?' he demanded, when the other guardian of the law turned up.

'For the murder of Mrs. Langley, at Birdwood, on October 7. You have admitted to Mr. Stubbs that your name is Solomon Stanley, and it's him as is believed to have done it.'

'Why, what blethering nonsense you are talking! I haven't been near Birdwood for more than a twelve-month.'

'Nonsense or no nonsense, you'll have to come along with us to the station.'

'Another fake of Rufus's, I suppose,' he muttered. 'He wants to have me locked up again. That is one more I owe him.'

At the station the prisoner declined to give his name or admit that he was Solomon Stanley; but as the tattoo marks on his arms and elsewhere, and his general personal appearance, corresponded with the description of the individual in question as set forth in the *Hue and Cry*, he was lodged in a cell, and the Liverpool police were advised by telegraph of the capture, and requested to send somebody who was able to identify him and empowered to take charge of him.

The Birdwood inspector and a constable, armed with a warrant, were promptly despatched to Mugby, whither they arrived early on the following morning, and were confronted with Sol at the police court; for Mugby being in another county, it was necessary for the warrant to be endorsed by a local justice. Mr. Stubbs,

who had spent a sleepless night counting his chickens before they were hatched, was also present.

Sol came in smiling.

'That's our man, and no mistake,' observed the inspector.

'Solomon Stanley,' began the magistrate's clerk.

'I ask your pardon, sir,' said the gipsy respectfully—'I ask your pardon, but I think there is a bit of a mistake.'

'What do you mean?'

'When do they say this murder was committed?'

'On the evening of October 7.'

'Well, I passed the night of October 7 in the same cell as I slept in last night, as the warder and two or three others will testify, and next morning I was fined five shillings and costs in this very court for being drunk and disorderly.'

'Now I look at you,' said the clerk, eyeing him keenly—'now I look at you, it seems to me that I have seen you before, though I have seen so many faces since that I wouldn't take my oath on it. But '—referring to his record—'I don't find any such name as Solomon Stanley.'

'That's only part of my name. The whole of it is Solomon Stanley Lee. Latterly I have dropped the Stanley—for reasons. Look for Solomon Lee.'

'Here it is. "Solomon Lee, arrested on October 7 by Constable Larkins, B 14, and on the 8th brought before the bench—his worship the mayor in the chair—and fined five shillings." Is he the same man, warder?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Call Constable Larkins.'

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'Yes, sir,' and both men took oath in the same sense. Moreover, the mayor, who presently appeared on the scene, straightway recognised Sol as the man whom he had fined five shillings on the day in question.

'Do you think, in the circumstances, it is worth while executing your warrant?' he asked the Liverpool inspector. 'You will have all the trouble and expense for nothing. The prisoner could not be committing a murder at Birdwood at the very time he was howling drunk in our lock-up.'

This there was no gainsaying; but as the inspector objected to forego the execution of the warrant on his own responsibility, it was arranged that he should return forthwith to Liverpool, lay the matter before his superiors, and telegraph their decision to the authorities at Mugby, who would meanwhile detain Sol in custody.

'Eight hundred pounds clean gone! I felt as sure of the money as if I had it in my pocket—and I have made that ruffian my enemy for life,' thought Mr. Stubbs as he went sorrowful away.

CHAPTER XIV.

MONEY MATTERS.

THE news carried by the inspector to Liverpool and Birdwood caused almost as great a commotion there as the murder had caused. Neither the police nor anybody else had entertained the slightest doubt that Sol was the delinquent, and though the police were by no means sure of convicting him, they thought they had a very strong case.

Now, they were completely nonplussed—without even the shadow of a clue—and though they tried hard to trace the mysterious stranger and supposed owner of the rifle, whom they had wrongly identified with the gipsy, they failed utterly.

It was too late.

They could not even imagine any plausible motive for the crime, and Langley appeared to be as much puzzled as themselves.

He had made so sure that Sol fired the fatal shot that the fiasco surprised him beyond measure. He was unable even to help the police with a suggestion.

‘If Stanley is not the man,’ he said, ‘I have no idea who is. I wish I had. I am completely at sea.’

'Have you no other enemies than this man?' asked the detective who had charge of the case.

'One cannot well go through life without making enemies, Mr. Frost, but I certainly have no other in this country, and it is not conceivable that anybody would come all the way from America and risk hanging merely for the sake of gratifying some old grudge. Anyhow, I know nobody who is capable of such criminal folly.'

Notwithstanding this disclaimer, Langley had his thoughts on this subject, thoughts which may be summed up in one word—Juanita.

Killing Ida was just the sort of revenge she was likely to take, assuming that she had heard of the marriage, knew where he was, and could find an agent willing to risk his life in her service—assumptions, however, for which he had no warrant, and all highly improbable.

Moreover, if she had contrived Ida's death, she was not likely to forego the sweetest part of her revenge by leaving him in ignorance of the fact.

She would come to him and say:

'I killed your wife; denounce me to the police if you dare.'

And he would not dare.

Could she have done it in person, and disguised?

No! The idea was absurd. To state the question was to answer it.

The actual murderer must have been a dead shot. Juanita was not a dead shot. Furthermore, the buyer of the rifle was a man; and it was a man who had been hanging about the place and asking questions of the lodge gatekeeper and at the inn.

Conceivable it might be, that this man had acted as

her deputy, yet hardly possible. There were ladrones on the frontier and in Mexico who would commit a murder for a dollar, and American and English outlaws who would kill anybody for a sufficient consideration—out there. But to make it worth a man's while to come all the way to England and commit a crime that might cost him his life would involve an outlay running into thousands of dollars. Nor was she the woman to entrust her vengeance to a ruffian who would be much more likely to betray his trust than carry out her behest.

No, it was not Juanita's hand that struck the blow.

Whose then?

Langley could not tell. For once he was completely baffled.

Yet he never doubted that Ida's murder was an act of vengeance directed against himself by some unknown enemy, and originating in the dark past which he had striven to forget and thought it possible to ignore.

Sol was of course set free without more ado, and after several adjournments, the coroner's inquest resulted in a verdict of 'Feloniously killed by some person or persons unknown.'

From inquiries made by the Mugby police, it appeared that a local horsedealer had met with Lee (as he now called himself) at Barnet Fair, and was so much struck by his knowledge of horses and skill as a horseman that he engaged him as a stud-groom and rough-rider, and, notwithstanding the gipsy's recent imprisonment, meant to keep him as long as he chose to stay.

In the meanwhile Langley was more talked about than he had ever been before—in England. It seemed hardly possible that he should be unable to help the police to a clue. Ill-natured people began to hint that

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in imputing the murder to Stanley he had purposely put them on a false scent, and Frost, the detective, made cautious inquiry as to whether Mr. Langley had profited by his wife's death. This was his last attempt to frame a fresh theory, and when he found that the nascent idea had no basis in fact—that Langley had much to lose and nothing to gain by the murder—he abandoned the investigation pending further enlightenment.

Some of these things came to Mr. Berners' knowledge, and at his own request Romaine told him what people were saying, also (for his own purpose) some part of the story he had heard from the gipsy, which, as was to be expected, Mr. Berners indignantly denounced as the malignant falsehoods of a revengeful ruffian.

'All the same, Mr. Romaine,' he added, 'I should like you to keep this entirely to yourself. These are palpable lies; but there are people who believe lies, and even add to them, and Mr. Langley is closely connected with the family.'

Nevertheless, and though he honestly tried to disbelieve Sol's statements, these things made a deep impression on Mr. Berners' mind; they revived and intensified the mistrust with which he had regarded Rufus at the outset of their acquaintance. The mystery that hung over his antecedents had never been cleared up; now there was another mystery, and the head of the firm detested mysteries. Also, Mr. Berners blamed Langley for the worry and annoyance he was undergoing, and which he felt he had not deserved. For in his heart this prosperous British merchant thought it rather a slur on the Providential

government of the world that a gentleman of his means and respectability, who went regularly to church, gave liberally to local charities, and faithfully performed all the duties of his position, should be saddled with so dubious a brother-in-law and mixed up in a business which bade fair to become a public scandal.

The change in his sentiments was reflected in Mr. Berners' manner, which showed Langley what was passing in his mind. Langley's neighbours also began to be less cordial in their greetings, and some with whom he had been on terms of familiar friendship ostentatiously avoided him.

From all of which he inferred that people 'were talking about him.'

'They actually suspect that I had some hand in poor Ida's murder,' he thought, 'or that I am keeping something back that might throw light on the mystery—or can Richard have got an inkling?'

It was about this time that Richard called on Langley about business.

'I am very sorry to be obliged to approach you on such a subject so soon after poor Ida's death,' said he; 'but duty is duty, and as the acting trustee under her settlement, I have a duty to perform. . . . You are aware of the terms of the settlement, I suppose?'

'Only generally. I never read your father's will.'

'I have brought a copy with me'—producing it. 'Here is the clause to which I have to direct your attention. The gist of it is that the income arising from Ida's share of the trust fund was to be paid to her personally, for her own use and against her own receipt.'

'And as she is dead and unable to give a receipt, the income lapses and can no longer be paid. Is that what you mean?'

'Yes; except that though the income can no longer be paid, it does not lapse—it accumulates. But in the event of either of the testator's daughters dying and leaving a child, or children, or other descendants under age, the trustees are empowered, at their discretion, to use a portion of the income arising from the trust fund for the maintenance and education of the aforesaid child, children, or other descendants. I have consulted with my co-trustee, and we think that we shall be justified in allowing you a thousand a year for Irene's upbringing and education.'

'That is five thousand dollars.'

'Exactly. Five thousand dollars—during her minority, of course. When she comes of age her fortune will be at her own disposal. And a very handsome fortune it will be. It is now fifty thousand pounds, and we shall add to it at the rate of fifteen hundred a year, investing the same as it accrues, at, I hope, five per cent. Twenty years' accumulations and accretions on this scale will make a lot of money—probably fifty thousand more. And a third of Cordelia's settled fortune must eventually be hers. Your daughter will be an heiress, Rufus.'

'If she lives.'

'Of course, if she lives; and she is a healthy child. Meanwhile, you will not be badly off. With the allowance we propose to make to you and the five hundred a year settled on you by Ida, you will have a clear income of fifteen hundred.'

'A very nice income, and, as you say, I shall be well

off, yet not well enough off to keep this place up and live as we have lived. However, that does not matter, for I shall quit.'

'Leave Birdwood, do you mean?' said Mr. Berners, with an eagerness that betrayed his thoughts. It was what he desired, and, had he not feared to give offence, would have proposed.

'Yes, I mean to leave Birdwood.'

'And where do you think you shall go?'

'I have not decided. Either to the Continent or America.'

'Well, perhaps it is the wisest thing you can do, in the circumstances. And wherever you are, the fifteen hundred a year will, of course, always be at your disposal. So long as Irene lives, and until she is of age, you may, on the first of every January and every July, draw on the house at sight for seven hundred and fifty pounds, on the sole condition that you advise us and send a receipt in a form which I will give you. And though we shall, of course, take such advice as an intimation that Irene is alive and well, we shall hope to learn, from time to time, whatever further particulars about both her and yourself you may be pleased to give us.'

'You shall hear from me regularly. But I shall not be going for a month or two. . . . And now, Richard, as we are on family matters, I have something to say. Unless I am much mistaken, there are people who think that, if I would, I might throw some light on the mystery of your sister's death. It is not true. I no more know who did that foul deed than yourself. I have not even a suspicion. But some time I shall know; and I swear to you by what I hold most sacred

—I swear by Ida's memory—that I will either bring the murderer to justice or punish him myself.'

'Good heavens! You surely don't mean that you will kill him?' demanded Mr. Berners, aghast. The intensity of his brother-in-law's manner, and the vehemence of his language, frightened him.

'I mean that I shall either see him hanged, or kill him with my own hands. Even though he be my bosom friend, and his death should involve my own, Ida's shall be avenged. When—whether next year or twenty years hence—I know not. But the time will come.'

CHAPTER XV.

MR. LIMBERY HICKS.

THOUGH Langley had surmised that his wife's death would worsen his prospects, and might affect his income, he was far from expecting that it would be reduced by one half, and that he would be compelled to wind up his affairs and leave Birdwood within a month or two.

There was no question as to the compulsion, since before he went away Mr. Berners dropped a hint which showed that ejection would be the alternative of voluntary surrender.

He had observed blandly that Cordelia would no doubt be pleased to let Rufus keep the Cottage until he found another domicile, or made up his mind whither he would betake himself. This meant that Ida's death had given the surviving sister sole control of the Cottage, and that she either objected to Langley as a tenant or intended to occupy the house herself, or both.

Yes, his brief spell of Paradise—lucid interval in a lurid life—was past. He must go forth into the world once more, the unknown before him, the curse of the past still clinging to him; and the sooner he

went the better, ere that past was further unveiled, and his hidden enemy dealt him another mortal stroke—aimed, it might be, at Irene, the pledge of Ida's love and the apple of his own eye.

And he had another and more pressing and prosaic reason for hastening to depart—he was in debt. Money had always slipped easily through his fingers, and though Ida's income was handsome, and ought to have been ample, they had lived beyond it—a fact, however, of which she was unaware, and which Langley himself did not realize until after her death. He had bought horses of price, and kept an expensive stud; before he abandoned betting he had lost money on the turf; and now that his income was cut down by a half, he could only discharge his liabilities by selling everything off—a proceeding for which his resolve to leave Birdwood would afford a sufficient excuse.

His pride would not let him ask Richard for a loan (which Richard would probably refuse), and to leave any of his debts unpaid were to make people talk about him more than ever, and Langley was much less desirous to be remembered than forgotten.

Shortly after he had come to this decision, and was busied with the preparations and arrangements which it involved, he received a letter dated from the Crooked Billet (a once well-known Liverpool inn, now defunct), signed 'T. Limbery Hicks.' It stated briefly, yet courteously, that the writer had lately arrived from America, bringing with him a letter of introduction from their 'common and highly-esteemed friend, Mr. James T. Meach,' and he should take it as a favour to be informed when it would suit Mr. Langley's convenience to grant him an interview—on business of importance.

Langley's first impulse was to leave the letter unanswered, or answer it with a refusal—he had no wish to see anybody from America—but on reading the letter a second time he changed his mind. To refuse the man an interview would be an act of discourtesy both to him and Meach—perhaps make enemies of them, and he had enemies enough already.

Then the mention of business—and important business—piqued his curiosity. Who was this T. Limbery Hicks, and what business could he have with him? It might be something which it behoved him to know, and might be dangerous not to learn.

So, notwithstanding his objection to Americans, he wrote to Mr. Hicks, saying he should be glad to see him on the following afternoon.

During the rest of the day the gentleman in question was much in Langley's mind, though he had so many other things to think about. He often asked himself, not without a vague feeling of apprehension, who he could be, and what was the nature of the business which he had to communicate. But at the time appointed for his coming, Langley was so absorbed in the interesting occupation of overhauling papers and examining bills that he had become oblivious of his proposed visitor's existence, and when a servant presented his card, he gave a start of surprise, as though he had never heard the name before.

'Mr. Limbery Hicks! Ah, I remember,' he said absently, pushing away his papers and laying down his pen. 'Show him in.'

Whereupon exit the servant and enter the guest.

Langley was a brave man. He possessed in an eminent degree the quality described by Bonaparte as

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'three-o'clock-in-the-morning courage.' When roused from his sleep in the dead of night by the yells of a horde of bloodthirsty Indians, he had given his orders and made his dispositions as promptly and coolly as though he had foreseen everything and forgotten nothing. Again and again had he escaped deadly peril by sheer pluck, readiness of resource, and presence of mind. Yet the mere appearance of Mr. Limbery Hicks seemed to strike him with paralysis.

Resting his hands on the arms of his chair, he leaned forward, speechless and agape, with startled eyes and pallid face.

Nevertheless, there was nothing in the outward presentment of his visitor to inspire fear. Rather the reverse, indeed. Of medium stature and muscular build, he had a broad forehead, shrewd gray eyes, with overhanging brows, massive jaws, a sallow, somewhat leathery skin, a good mouth, and singularly strong white teeth. And he came in smiling, with outstretched hand.

'The Old Man!' gasped Langley, pulling himself together and rising from his chair.

'Nobody else, you bet; and glad to see you and shake your hand once more, dear boy'—suited the action to the word. 'But I am afraid the pleasure is not reciprocal. You don't seem overjoyed to see me.'

'Well, you took me by surprise, and no mistake. I did not expect to see you here, of all places in the world. But why Limbery Hicks, and a letter of introduction to me?'

'You surely wouldn't have me call myself David D. Dundas in Liverpool! And Hicks is a good old English name, I believe. One of the objects of my

visit to England is to look up the family pedigree, and make a pilgrimage to the home of my ancestors. They were located in Yorkshire, I am told. As for the letter of introduction, I chanced to make the acquaintance of James T. Meach, who runs a store and a farm at St. Louis. He spoke of his trip to Europe, and told what a high old time he had. Yours was one of the names he mentioned, and you may imagine how delighted I was to hear what a nice, soft place you had got, and how I wormed out of him all he knew about you. I guess I felt as joyful as Jacob did when he heard that his son, whom he had believed dead, was alive. But as the prodigal was not likely to come to me, I thought I would go to the prodigal—give him an agreeable surprise, you know—and so asked Meach for an introduction.'

'There is no question about the surprise,' said Langley dryly. 'But you surely don't expect me to believe that you are come to Europe expressly to see me.'

'You forget the proposed pilgrimage,' returned Mr. Hicks, showing his white teeth and smiling pleasantly. 'Referring once more to the letter, it may be convenient for you, in certain eventualities, to say that I came to you with an introduction from a common friend. Our previous connection and ancient friendship had better be ignored. Ah, pard, it was an ill turn you played me when you abandoned that enterprise—there was a hundred thousand dollars in it at the very least—and left me in ignorance of your fate. I feared some evil had befallen you, and sorrowed many days. But I understand it all now. You were in love, and they say everything is fair in love and war. I

understand it, and forgive you. All the same, you might have got the plates done, and let me know that your lines were fallen in pleasant places.'

'When did you come over?' asked Langley abruptly.

'Three or four weeks since. I have been to London and Paris. I should have looked you up sooner, only that I heard—read in the papers, I mean—what a terrible loss you had sustained, and did not like to intrude on your grief.'

'You were very considerate.'

'I always am, dear boy—I always am. I gather also from the papers that you have not found out who did it.'

'No; I wish I could. I thought it was Sol, but he proved an alibi.'

'Sol! Well, I don't think I should have suspected Sol. He is revengeful, I know, and would not stick at murder or aught else to gratify a grudge, if he could do it safely. But murder is a risky thing in this country, and unless I am much mistaken, Sol sets as high a value on his windpipe as he used to do on his scalp; but let him catch you unawares on the llanos, or in some lonely quebrada, and I wouldn't give much for your life—if he wanted it——'

Here Mr. Limbery Hicks stopped short; then, in a stage whisper, and eagerly, as if he had conceived a happy thought, said:

'Juanita?'

'I know what you mean. The same idea has occurred to me, but it won't wash,' returned Langley. 'She is not the sort to skulk behind a hedge; besides, she cannot shoot straight, and with her appearance and broken English could not show in these parts without

attracting attention; and she would talk—couldn't help it.'

'I did not mean herself. Somebody may have done it at her procurement.'

'Who, and at what price?'

'That is more than I can tell you. Only there is many a man who would do that, and more, for Juanita's black eyes.'

'All the same, I don't believe she had any hand in killing my wife. But I mean to find out who did it—I've got to—and as sure as he is alive, he shall either hang by the neck till he is dead or die by my hand.'

'A very proper sentiment, Rufus—a most commendable sentiment. I hope I may be present when the ruffian gets his deserts. It will be a gratifying spectacle. . . . Do you happen to have such a thing about you as a drop of tarantula juice?'

'I have something better—old Glenlivet.'

Langley rang the bell, and, calling for decanters, told his guest to help himself—which he did copiously.

'May I smoke, pard?' he asked, producing a cigar-case.

'You may commit suicide, if you like,' answered Langley, with a hard laugh.

'It's very kind of you to give me permission, dear boy—very kind; but for the present I shall not avail myself of it, if it is only because we should have to bid each other a long farewell, which would be very distressing to both of us.'

'What is your game, John?'

'Hicks, if you please, Rufus. I left John on the other side of the water. Limbery Hicks, introduced

by a common friend, and descended from a highly respectable family in the West Riding of Yorkshire.'

Langley made an impatient gesture.

'Hang your family! Come to the point. What is your game?' he repeated. 'If it is money, you are come to the wrong shop. I've got none.'

'I thought you had married money, and were rolling in riches, and it looks so. Why, the fixings in this room alone are worth a thousand dollars, and as I walked through your beautiful grounds, I observed stables, carriages, horses, and servants, and other signs of affluence.'

'I married a lady with a good income, but unfortunately it died with her,' interrupted Langley coldly. 'This house and a good deal of the furniture belong to Miss Berners, and I shall have to sell the horses and whatever other odds and ends I possess in order to satisfy my creditors.'

'Dear, dear! all this is very sad,' observed Mr. Hicks sympathetically, as he flicked the ash from the end of his cigar. 'Your wife's death was a double misfortune. No wonder your manner is cold and your face careworn. So you are left quite destitute?'

'Well, almost. I may have a hundred or two to the good when I have paid my debts, and I am in hopes that the trustees will make me an allowance for the maintenance and education of my little girl. But it is entirely at their discretion,' added Langley, who, fearing a demand for money, was anxious to make out that he had none.

'Your little girl is a great heiress, I understand. I heard somebody say in the cars as we came along that she would be almost a millionaire—in dollars.'

'If Irene lives twenty years longer, she is likely to be very well off.'

'And then you will be well off too. You may be sure she won't let her dear father want—and such a father! But meanwhile?'

'Oh, I shall exist somehow. Perhaps return to America and run a store, or go out West and buy a farm.'

Whereupon Mr. Limbery Hicks laughed boisterously. 'Run a store or a farm!' he exclaimed. 'It isn't in you, Rufus—it isn't in you. Cheeseparing and petty rogueries are no more in your line than they are in mine, and to succeed as a storekeeper or a farmer you must practise both. But to come to the point, as you said just now. You asked whether my game was money. It is nothing else, and a lot of it. My conceptions, like the American continent, are always vast.'

'Oh, you may conceive till all's blue, but if you have come here after money, you are hunting heel. I could do with some myself.'

'And you shall have it, dear boy. So far from wanting to squeeze you, I propose to enrich you. Look here!'

Mr. Hicks produced a pocket-book, took from it three pieces of paper, and laid them on the table.

'Bills!' said Langley, examining them. 'A Rothschild for seven hundred and fifty pounds, a Baring for six hundred pounds, and a Fruhling and Goschen for nine hundred pounds! Bogus?'

'Certainly not,' returned the other indignantly. 'They are as genuine as our glorious Constitution.'

'Stolen, then?'

'Don't make imputations on my honour, please.

No, sir, these bills are neither bogus nor stolen. They are my property, and honestly come by.'

'What are you going to do with them? Keep them as curiosities?'

'Now you are sarcastic. What am I going to do with them? Thereby hangs a scheme that, boldly and cautiously engineered, will produce a small fortune, of which, if you stand in with us, you shall have a share that will make you passing rich.'

'What do you expect me to do for it?'

'I am going to tell you, and as the business is important, I crave your earnest attention.'

CHAPTER XVI.

A SINISTER SCHEME.

‘THERE are three of us in it—you will make a fourth,’ began Mr. Limbery Hicks—‘and we have planked down twenty-five thousand dollars apiece ; for this is a gamble that cannot be played without staking beforehand.’

‘I cannot plank down twenty-five thousand dollars,’ quoth Langley.

‘Nobody asked you. Your co-operation will be looked upon as an equivalent, and we have quite as much coin as we need. I boss the show—naturally. We are going to run two firms—one at Baltimore, the other at Liverpool. The firm here will be Limbery Hicks, Hart and Co. ; at Baltimore, Hicks, Dalton and Co. Hicks, Dalton and Co. will ship produce to the consignment of Limbery Hicks, Hart and Co., and the Liverpool house will ship soft goods and hardware to the consignment of Hicks, Dalton and Co. Do you tumble?’

‘I think so. But if that is all, it strikes me that you are much more likely to lose your seventy-five thousand dollars than make a fortune.’

‘But it isn’t all. It’s only a blind. I am not so soft as to handle either soft goods or hardware. Dalton will buy drafts on tip-top houses, such as I have here’

—fluttering the bills—‘and remit them to us, and we shall get them accepted and discount them. That will establish confidence, especially as we shall keep a good balance with our bankers, and enable us to study at our leisure the signatures of our accepting friends—and you know what a penman I am. But I am not in it with Hart. Give him a day to practise, and he will imitate your sign manual so exactly that you could not tell it from your own. Do you tumble now?’

‘Yes, I think so,’ said Langley dryly. ‘When you have thrown the discounters off their guard by giving them a few genuine bills, you will stick them with a lot of bogus paper.’

‘That’s it. You were always quick of apprehension, Rufus. And before the bogus paper matures, Limbery Hicks, Hart and Co. will vamoose.’

‘Of course. But you are going to play a dangerous game, old man; remember that the penalty of failure will be ten or twenty years at the hulks.’

‘I wouldn’t give a fig for an enterprise without danger; and, barring accidents, we are bound to succeed.’

‘Barring accidents! The best-laid schemes of mice and men gang aft agley, remember.’

‘This scheme won’t gang agley, you bet. We only lack one thing to ensure complete success—introductions and references. For reasons which I need not mention we cannot get any of the right sort from home; and a bogus introduction, though easily faked up, wouldn’t do. It might trip us up right away. That’s where you will come in.’

‘Oh, that’s where I shall come in!’

‘Yes, we want introductions to the Bank of England,

Overend, Gurney's, a private or joint-stock Liverpool bank, and a ditto London. Not all at once, of course, but as soon as may be.'

'You want to fly high. The Bank of England and Overend, Gurney's!'

'Well, I believe that when those two get good names the figures are a minor consideration. But as I shall have to put through fifty thousand pounds' worth of flash bills inside of three months, I must spread them, or some suspicious bank-manager will be wondering how we come by them all, and make inquiries, and that might be awkward. The usance will have to be sixty and ninety days, and by the time the first bill matures, Hart and I mean to be in Mexico, or elsewhere. You had better stay here and pose as a victim, and when the affair has blown over, you can either join us or go your own way.'

'All very fine, John—Limbery Hicks, I should say—all very fine. But aren't you rather counting without your host? I neither know the Liverpool agent of the Bank of England nor Overend, Gurney, nor yet a London bank; and as I am not in business, my name would be of no use to you as a reference.'

'On the contrary, it would be very useful. If you introduce me to your own bankers as a man of means, who will keep a good balance to his credit, and draws only on first-class houses, they will open an account with me right away. That will be a nice beginning; and as for the others, you can easily get introduced to them from your brother-in-law.'

'For the purpose of introducing you afterwards?'

'Of course. What else? Unless you get them to introduce me without your intervention, which would

be still better. I leave that to you. But it has got to be done somehow. . . . Why do you start so many difficulties?' asked Limbery Hicks, abruptly and impatiently. 'Sixty thousand dollars are not to be picked up every day, without risk and almost without trouble—and you stone-broke, too.'

Langley felt by no means sure of getting the sixty thousand dollars in any event, and in his then mood he was indisposed to take part in so dangerous and nefarious a scheme, even though it should bring him yet larger gains. But it was no use appealing to the better feelings of a man who had no more moral sense than a Sicilian brigand; and as he had reasons for not wanting to break with his quondam comrade or anger him with a point-blank refusal, Langley's only chance, and that a remote one, of evading the dilemma was to induce him to abandon the enterprise by exalting its dangers and exaggerating its difficulties.

'I pause for a reply, and you make none,' said Hicks, after a short interlude of silence. 'Why do you start so many difficulties?'

'Because they exist and you ignore them. Your scheme, though it sounds well enough in theory, is beset with difficulties and terribly risky. You propose to discount your flash bills with the Bank of England, with other banks, and with Overend, Gurney's. Now, these institutions are all more or less linked together; among their directors are sure to be some of the partners in the accept houses whose names you are going to forge, and if, as is almost sure to be the case, any of your bogus paper comes before them, the fat will be in the fire right away.'

'I don't think much of that objection,' said Hicks

bluntly. 'We shall use only the names of houses on whom we have had genuine credits, and these men you speak of—heads of firms—neither carry their bill-books in their pockets nor remember next morning what they accept the day before. I tell you this is a spec. with a maximum of profit and a minimum of risk. Besides, what is the risk to you? You take none.'

'You forget that you are engaged in a criminal conspiracy, and if I take any part in it whatever, or receive any part of the proceeds, I shall be equally guilty in the eye of the law with yourselves.'

'How will the law know aught about it?'

'Hart might turn Queen's evidence.'

'Hart peach! Not he. He is no more capable of peaching than I am or you are. Anything else?'

Langley took time to consider, and the Old Man had again to wait for an answer, inwardly raging.

There was a day when Langley had admired his ancient colleague, taken his advice, and blindly followed his lead. But time and the healthier moral influence of his recent environment had altered his views and opened his eyes, and he formed a juster estimate of John's character. Once he had trusted him implicitly; now he felt far from sure of his good faith, even such good faith as is said to prevail among thieves. If his scheme miscarried, he was quite capable of betraying an accomplice to save his own skin. Moreover, though when rubbed the right way—that is to say, the way he liked—he was as affable as an angel, he could neither brook opposition nor pocket an affront, and had made it a boast that he never either forgave an injury or forgot a slight; and Langley's abandonment of the scheme which had brought him to Europe must have

offended the *soi-disant* Hicks beyond measure, probably beyond forgiveness, though it suited his present purpose to make light of it.

In short, Langley began to suspect a trap, and that it was John's object to make use of him, and then leave him in the lurch.

'Is there anything else? Can you not think of some other danger or difficulty?' asked Hicks sarcastically.

'Only this—the Bank of England never forgives. When it is a question of punishing a fraud, money is no object. It would follow you to the ends of the earth, even though the expense were to double its loss.'

'It would not catch me, though. I have trod the stage, and can make up my face so that my own mother wouldn't know me. Besides, I shall make straight for Mexico; and the British Government has no extradition treaty with Mexico.'

'What does that matter? The Mexican police are about as venal as they make 'em, and for a sufficient consideration would either bounce you out of the country or throw you into a calaboza and let you rot, and you durst not claim the protection of your own Government.'

'I don't agree with you, and—I am getting deucedly tired of all this jaw. This thing has got to be put through, and it cannot be put through without your co-operation. I must have introductions. Help me, and you shall have immunity and sixty thousand; refuse, and I ruin you.'

'How?'

'Weil, I should begin by relating to your brothers-in-law and a few others the exploits of a certain Captain George in Texas and elsewhere, and a few other things,

and informing them that when Rufus J. Langley came to England he left a wife in America.'

'It's a lie! Why, you said yourself——'

Mr. Limbery Hicks sprang from his chair as though he had been electrified.

'Call me a liar! I'll let you see!' he exclaimed, putting his hand behind him.

Langley observed the movement, and quick as thought threw himself on Hicks, forced him back into his chair, and held him fast.

'Loose me, you ruffian! D——n you, let me go! I'll have your blood for this!' gasped the captive.

'Not until I get your six-shooter.'

Hicks began to laugh.

'I haven't one on me,' he said. 'It was just the old habit. You made me mad, and when I get mad I always feel like shooting somebody. Put your hand in my hip-pocket and feel for yourself.'

'You are right; there is no revolver. A very pretty bowie, though,' said Langley grimly, producing the implement in question.

'I shouldn't have hurt you with it, pard. A bowie isn't like a six-shooter—off before you have time to reflect—and I need your help too much to take your life, even if we weren't old friends. But I cannot stand being called a liar by anybody—that's a fact.'

'Though you are now engaged in a swindle that will cause you to tell a thousand lies,' retorted Langley, pocketing the knife and resuming his seat.

'The swindle is a matter of business; the other a matter of personal feeling. A man may have gentlemanly instincts, though he does occasionally resort to unconventional ways of turning a penny.'

On this both laughed, as though their recent tiff had in no way disturbed their friendly relations, albeit each had probably thoughts which he would have been loath to reveal.

'I am sorry that I so far forgot myself as to use threats and lose my temper,' observed Hicks, in a tone of self-reproach; 'but I always was hasty, and I ask your pardon. You will throw in with us, Rufus? It's worth your while.'

'I don't think I can, John.'

'Well, I shall say no more. All the same——'

'Which means that you will do what you threatened. All right, do it. I don't deny that you can make things unpleasant for me, but no more. In this country, at least, my record is clear. And tale-telling is a game that two can play at. If you tell tales about Captain George, I can tell something about David D. Dundas which would greatly interest Berners Brothers—and the police.'

'They couldn't identify him with Limbery Hicks. I looked in at the news-room the other day, and they no more knew me than Adam—not even that whipper-snapper Romaine, who thinks himself so clever, and I stared him full in the face.'

'Called at the reading-room, did you? Well, you are a cool hand!'

'Didn't you know that before? Come now, Rufus, say done, and take this money. It's about all you have to do, and no risk worth mentioning—and you never used to count risk. . . . You still hesitate? Great Scott! You surely have not set up a conscience since you settled in England?'

'I think I have—in a small way. Anyhow, I have

become the father of a little girl, and for her sake I mean to keep clear of dubious enterprises.'

'All the greater reason for standing in with us and preventing unsavoury disclosures. You wouldn't like her to know when she grows up what I know, and that when you married her mother there was a woman in America who claimed to be your wife—no offence in that, I hope—and so long as you and I pull together, all this can be kept dark. Sol does not know everything, and, being a vagabond and a gaol-bird, his word goes for nothing. There only remains Juanita, and now that your wife is dead, I think she will be open to an arrangement. If not, we must secure her silence by other means,' added Mr. Hicks significantly. 'I sympathize with your desire to be on the square, though you may not think so. But when you once run off the straight track, it is deuced hard to get on again; and do as you will, you cannot wipe out your past.'

This to Langley was painfully obvious. It confronted him there and then in the person of his old pal, who would not be denied, and whom he feared to defy. It was all very well saying that his record in England was clear, and that the threatened disclosures would not seriously hurt him. They would hurt his child, alienate his wife's relatives, and afford Richard Berners an excuse—as he might deem it a sufficient reason—for declining to make him an allowance for Irene's maintenance and education. It would be open to him to say that her father was not a proper person to be entrusted with her upbringing, and who could gainsay him?

The alternative was participation in the scheme, and, apart from the fact that he had set up a conscience in

a small way, he augured ill of the scheme. The slightest hitch, the mere breathing of a suspicion, and the game would be up and the players laid by the heels. Furthermore, he had no guarantee that Hicks would play fair—doubted, indeed, whether it was not his deliberate intention to play false.

Danger beset either course; but to offend against the law of the land, and thereby place himself more in this ruffian's power than he was already, seemed to Langley about the very worst alternative he could adopt. Yet the native hue of his resolution was sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought. A middle course might be found. Meanwhile, he would temporize.

Hicks, who was a keen physiognomist, saw that his last argument had made an impression, but deemed it inexpedient to press for an immediate answer.

'Let him stew in his own thoughts for a night,' he said to himself. Then to Langley kindly:

'There's no hurry, pard. Sleep it over, and I'll call again to-morrow.'

'Don't; I'll call at the Crooked Billet.'

'At three p.m.?'

'That will suit me.'

Here the door opened, and a servant announced that nurse and baby were in the garden.

In the horror of his wife's death, Langley's fears for his child had almost been forgotten, yet certain precautions were still observed, one being that she should never be taken out for an airing without her father's knowledge.

'I will come,' he said.

'And I will go with you,' added Hicks. 'I guess I shall be in time for the next train to Liverpool.'

The nurse, Mrs. Matty Parrox, a middle-aged 'widow woman' from the Fylde country, as proud of her charge as though it were a king's daughter, was in the garden, with baby in her arms and a mastiff of leonine aspect and name at her heels.

Irene put out her little arms to her father and pouted, smiling for a kiss, which was gladly given. Then Hicks made as if he would do the same, but with a shriek of terror the child turned away from him and hid her face in Matty's breast, and Lion showed his teeth, growling fiercely.

'It seems I am not in favour here. I had better be going,' said the Old Man, with a harsh laugh. 'One word, Rufus'—drawing him aside. 'A pretty little thing. What with her money and her nice looks, she will be worth stealing one of these days.'

'What do you mean?' demanded Langley, reddening with anger.

'Only that you will have to look out, or some young spark will be running away with her. You seem fond of the child, and no wonder; and it is as much in her interest as yours that I urge you to throw in with us. But I must hurry up, or I shall miss my train. *Hasta mañana* (till to-morrow), as we used to say in Mexico. I shall expect you at three. *Adios!*'

CHAPTER XVII.

A WAY OUT.

AFTER long pondering, Langley bethought him of a way out of the maze in which Hicks had entangled him. It was not a very heroic way—not such a one as a high-principled man would have taken. On the other hand, if Langley had been high-principled he had not been hampered with the heritage of an evil past, and his nascent moral sense was not yet sufficiently developed to enable him to do right though the heavens might fall—perhaps never would be. But for his still living love for his dead wife and Irene, he would probably have yielded to the tempter and taken an active part in the plot, even against his better judgment as to its practicability and chances of success.

Irene was his chief thought. What would become of the child if he were taken from her? Who would look after and cherish her, and shield her from harm as he should?

And the Old Man's remark about her being worth stealing had rekindled his fears. It sounded like a covert threat, and confirmed him in his resolve to do nothing which might compromise the child's future or impair his power to protect her.

On his way to meet Hicks, Langley called at the Maritime Bank, and informed the manager that either that day or later he should probably bring him a customer whose acquaintance he had made through a common friend—mentioning Meach, and producing his letter—and who, as he (Langley) was informed, required no other facilities than the safe-keeping of his money and the occasional discounting of ‘gilt-edged paper.’

The manager said, smiling, that this was just the sort of account he liked, and made an inquiry as to the nature of his friend’s business.

‘That Mr. Hicks will tell you himself,’ replied Langley. ‘And I can hardly call him friend yet. He made his first call at my house yesterday, and as he happened to mention that he wanted introducing to a bank, I thought——’

‘You thought of us—for which I am greatly obliged, Mr. Langley. We always like to know the character of a new customer’s business, naturally; but I dare say Mr. Hicks will post me up.’

‘No doubt; and you will also be able to form an estimate of his personal qualities and knowledge of affairs.’

Langley found Mr. Limbery Hicks in the bar-parlour of the Crooked Billet, regaling himself with a glass of bitter beer and chatting with a quiet-looking gentleman with vigilant eyes, who was also drinking bitter beer, to whom, after greeting Hicks, Rufus nodded familiarly, and said, ‘How do you do?’ and made an observation about the weather.

The topic, though suggestive, was soon exhausted, and Hicks presently proposed a visit to his new offices in Lord Street.

'They are not quite in order yet, and smell pretty strong of paint,' he remarked, 'but I think the room is about ready. Anyhow, we shall be able to sit down and have a smoke.'

Langley acquiesced, and, after taking leave of the quiet-looking man, joined his companion, who was already *en route*.

'Who is your friend?' he asked.

'Frost, the detective.'

'A detective, is he? A useful man to know,' added Hicks significantly. 'Smart?'

'I believe so.'

'He is an exception, then. Most detectives are men of routine, and owe their successes chiefly to the fact that they have generally to do with ordinary cases, and stupid people who blunder. Anything out of the common puzzles them, and few of them can either suggest an original idea or make a sound deduction. I am not afraid of detectives, and if it should ever come to a match between me and Mr. Frost—though I don't think it will—I guess I know who'll win. Here we are.'

The offices were on the first-floor—three spacious rooms, newly decorated, looking into Lord Street, and occupied for the moment by two charwomen, who were washing the floors, and two young men, who were laying carpets.

'This is to be my sanctum,' said Hicks, leading the way to an inner room. 'I was right, you see; it is still rather chaotic. But we can sit down and have our talk more safely, if not more comfortably, than at the Billet. Take this easy-chair and a cigar. . . . That's right. Now for business. You have made up your mind, I suppose?'

'Yes. I have made up my mind. I will neither have a hand in this scheme of yours, nor take any part of the plunder.'

'That as you like, so long as you get me the introductions.'

'I cannot get you any London introductions whatever. Since that affair of the Suburban Sixes Berners have been very shy of strangers, and they would give you no introductions, even at my solicitation, without knowing a good deal more about you than I can tell them. Anyhow, I am not going to ask them. What I will do, and no more, is to introduce you to my own bankers; and, I dare say, if you work the account discreetly, and otherwise play your cards well for two or three months, they will give you whatever introductions you require.'

'That isn't good enough, Rufus. I don't want to wait two or three months before I begin operations. Delays are dangerous—and expensive. You must manage it somehow, or take the consequences, which means that I shall give Mr. Berners some highly interesting information about his brother-in-law.'

'Nay, you won't.'

'How so? Who is to hinder me?'

'If you decline my offer, I shall go right away and give Mr. Frost some interesting information touching the relations of Mr. David D. Dundas with Mr. Limbery Hicks, and you will sleep to-night in Kirkdale Prison. How would telling tales about me help you then—even if you could get anybody to believe you?'

Albeit in this there was doubtless some bravado, Langley had really made up his mind to do as he said, in the event of Hicks proving obdurate; and Hicks,

believing that he was in earnest, began to climb down.

'You surely wouldn't round on an old chum, Rufus,' he said reproachfully.

'It is what you threatened to do to me only just now. It would serve you right, and I'm not sure that it wouldn't be my best policy to denounce you right away without more ado.'

'You are chucking sixty thousand dollars away.'

'Very well, I will chuck them away.'

'When will you take me to this banker of yours?'

'The sooner the better. Right now.'

'Let us go, then.'

'One word before we start. You will paddle your own canoe; after this I shall come no more here—you will come no more to my house. If we meet in the street, we merely move to each other. So long as you observe these conditions, I shall keep my own counsel and your secret; break them, and I will thwart your scheme, let the consequences to myself be what they may. Do you agree?'

Hicks looked as black as thunder, but seeing that the only alternative was a quarrel and a rupture, and the ruin of his scheme, he said, 'I agree,' and registered a mental vow to 'make it hot' for Rufus whenever he got the chance.

The manager of the Maritime received his new customer with somewhat effusive courtesy, and when Hicks gave his business signature, and proposed to open the account with a draft on Rothschilds' for a thousand, and two or three bills, 'fine and short,' was obviously much impressed in his favour, asked him to look in occasionally, and said how glad he should be to

make the acquaintance of his partner, Mr. Hart, when that gentleman returned from London.

Langley, having played his part, left them talking, and went to the office in Water Street to see his brother-in-law, who, not taking kindly to the idea of having a sale by auction at the Cottage, had advised his sister to buy at a valuation whatever belonged to Rufus (except the horses, which were going to Tattersall's).

This suited him exactly. Before Hicks so portentously appeared he was in a great hurry, but he had now pressing reasons for desiring to get away quickly and quietly, and was well pleased to learn that Cordelia had fallen in with her brother's idea.

Richard was in a genial mood, and kinder in his manner than he had been at any previous time since Ida's death.

'When do you think you shall go?' he asked.

'As soon as my horses are sold and this valuation is put through. About the end of next week.'

'So soon? Well, as I said before, I think it is the best thing you can do, in the circumstances. All the same, I shall be sorry—we shall all be sorry, especially the boys. I hope you will do well, Rufus, and that Irene will be a blessing to you, and you to her; and in a few years, when these troubles are forgotten, you must revisit Liverpool, and make a long stay with us at the Manor House.'

And then Richard said that, if it would be any convenience to Rufus, he should be pleased to give him a cheque for the balance of the current year's interest, and the allowance for the next six months.

Rufus thanked his brother-in-law warmly, and said

it would be convenient, and, as he put the cheque in his pocket, felicitated himself on having so effectually muzzled the Old Man, and avoided taking a course which would have ended, abruptly and for ever, his relations with the firm in Water Street and the family at Birdwood.

It did not strike Langley that in introducing Hicks to the Maritime Bank he had done anything particularly reprehensible, and that he was thereby practically conniving at the contemplated fraud. He had carefully guarded himself against vouching for the bogus firm's honesty or respectability, and though he had not told the whole truth, he had said naught that was untrue. If the bank chose to trust Hicks, Hart and Co., or give them introductions without making further inquiry, that was their affair.

Neither did Langley think that the proceeding was likely to compromise him personally. As Hicks could not well begin to 'work the oracle' for a couple of months, the murder would not be out for four or five. Nearly the whole of that time Langley would have been abroad. If Hicks succeeded, he would take some other alias and make for a distant land; if he failed—whether he escaped or was captured—his mouth would be closed, and Langley could neither be called on for explanations nor subpoenaed as a witness.

He felt, in short, that he was now safe in any event, and that the Berners were not likely to hear aught to his discredit more substantial than vague rumour, or to obtain enlightenment touching those parts of his past which he wished to hide from them and would fain have forgotten.

After leaving the chief he went to the reading-room.

with a special object. Hicks had told him that he had been in Europe only three or four weeks. At the bank he had said, either inadvertently or deliberately, five or six weeks, and as he never lied without a purpose, Langley was curious to know the truth, and find out if he could why the Old Man had made contradictory statements in regard to a matter so seemingly trivial as the date of his arrival in England.

To this end he consulted a file of the local *Post*, then a weekly paper, which recorded the arrivals of the New York packets in Liverpool, and gave the names of their passengers.

The search was long and the result surprising. He found that Limbery Hicks had landed at Liverpool in June, and must therefore have been in Europe as many months as he pretended to have been weeks.

What had he been doing all this time, and why had he so long delayed making his call and explaining his precise business? As Ida was alive in June and more than three months afterwards, it could not be true that he had held back because of her death.

This suggested an *arrière pensée*. It implied that, in addition to the bogus bills swindle, Hicks was engaged in some other enterprise probably still more nefarious, of which he desired to keep Langley ignorant. Further than this Langley was unable to go, and, as he hoped he had done with Hicks, was not greatly concerned to go further.

'It will come out some time,' he thought, and for the present contented himself with making a note of the occurrence, and the exact date of the Old Man's arrival at Liverpool.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LAST SUNDAY.

DURING the remainder of the week Langley was engaged with the valuator who had been appointed by Mr. Berners to appraise the furniture and effects of the Cottage, and on the Sunday he went for the last time to the church where Ida and himself were married, and whither, during her lifetime, he had often accompanied her.

The time and place were propitious for retrospect and reflection, and evoked some painful thoughts and some melancholy forebodings. Never had Langley felt more sharply the difference between the possible and the actual, what might have been and what was, and being in a penitential mood, he made several virtuous resolutions, among others that he would go into business or take up the profession for which his father had destined him, lead an honourable life, and never again yield to his baser instincts.

But his first duty was to discover and inflict condign punishment on Ida's murderer; and being persuaded that a solution of the mystery was to be found only in America, he proposed—despite divers dangers to which

he foresaw the quest would expose him—thither to betake himself after a short sojourn on the Continent.

Langley's grave demeanour during the service, and his often-troubled eyes, attracted the attention and won for him the sympathy of his kinsfolk, especially Mrs. Berners, and as they left the church she greeted him kindly and asked him to luncheon.

Langley was pleased, and looked so. It was the first time since his wife's death that he had been asked to the Manor House.

'I shall be very glad,' he said; 'but you must let me go home first and see whether all is well with Irene.'

It was now Mrs. Berners' turn to look pleased.

'You are as devoted to your little girl as though you were her mother,' she said, smiling.

'She has only me, and I have only her,' returned Langley simply—an answer which so touched his sister-in-law's heart that she expressed a wish to accompany him, and they went together.

After seeing Irene, who was looking well and bonny, they turned their steps towards the Manor House, and Mrs. Berners said she had a communication to make. After hinting that Langley would find the child more of a burden and a tie than he anticipated, and that travelling with a baby was neither good for the baby nor pleasant for those who had it in charge, she mentioned that she had received a letter from Cordelia, offering to adopt Irene and be a mother to her, and bring her up as her own daughter; and put it to Rufus whether this would not be better for the child than taking her about with him on his travels.

'I shall not always be taking her about with me. We shall spend the winter on the Continent, and in the

spring, when Irene will be two years old, go to America and settle there. . . . Cordelia is very kind, and I am obliged to her; but Irene must be brought up as my daughter—and I cannot do without her, Maria.'

'The answer I expected,' said Mrs. Berners; 'and I should have thought worse of you if you had made any other. But as Cordelia asked me to make the proposal on her behalf, I was obliged to do so.'

There was another reason why Langley could not accept Miss Berners' offer; it would have deprived him of a thousand a year—though, to do him justice, this consideration did not influence his decision, and only occurred to him after he had given his answer.

But Cordelia believed otherwise; she believed that his motives for refusing her offer were wholly mercenary. Her sister's terrible death had set her more against men and matrimony than ever. If Ida had remained single, she would have been alive still; and in her heart Cordelia thought that Langley had contrived his late wife's death in order that he might marry another. For the present, however, she kept this dark suspicion to herself; but when her anticipation was realized, as it surely would be, she intended to adduce it to her brother as another instance of the infallibility of her intuitions and the depravity of men.

After Rufus had eaten his luncheon and taken his departure, Mr. and Mrs. Berners had a talk about him.

Quoth she:

'I feel sorry for Rufus, poor fellow! he looks so ill and seems so low. . . . I cannot think there is any truth in those stories you heard about him, Richard.'

'Well, I never attached much importance to them myself, as you know,' said Mr. Berners thoughtfully.

'The only authority for them is a convicted felon, on whose evidence I should be sorry to hang a dog; and we know how these things grow in the telling. All the same, there has always been a mystery about the man. We know no more of him than he has told us himself, and that is precious little. We never hear anything of his friends; he avoids his countrymen, and seldom, if ever, receives an American letter—all bad or, at any rate, equivocal signs. And then there is that awful affair of poor Ida's death. She had not an enemy in world. What can he have done to provoke so terrible a vengeance? For whichever of them he meant to kill, vengeance was undoubtedly the murderer's motive. The reading of the riddle must be sought in Langley's past life, yet he can throw no light on a crime which concerns him so nearly.'

'You think he could if he would?'

'I don't say that. I only say that, taken in connection with that vagabond's statements and the mystery in which Langley chooses to shroud his antecedents, it is very strange.'

'True. All the same, he was a good husband to Ida, and his devotion to that child is simply wonderful. I never saw anything like it in a man, and on that account alone I should be loath to believe that Rufus has ever led a bad, wicked life and done dreadful things.'

'Those are redeeming features, certainly; and had it been otherwise—if he had been unkind to Ida and neglectful of his child, I should have treated him very differently; but it does not follow that because a man is capable of strong attachments he is incapable of doing wrong.'

And then, by way of illustration, Mr. Berners called

to mind an incident which had occurred at the trial of Burke and Hare. With them was tried a woman, accused of complicity in their crimes. She was acquitted, and when the jury had rendered the verdict, Burke, who had been found guilty, and knew that he would be hanged, turned to her, and exclaimed, 'Thank God, Ellen, you are saved !' Even at that supreme moment the first thought of this sordid wretch, whose hideous trade was exhuming corpses and committing murder to provide subjects for dissection, was for the woman he loved.

'There is no accounting for the vagaries of human nature; and we are told that the heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked,' added Mr. Berners sententiously. 'Nevertheless, every man ought to be held innocent until he is proved guilty. I know nothing against Rufus Langley. He may be a most estimable gentleman, with a clean record and a conscience void of offence; and as I have acted on that assumption in all my dealings with him, I shall have nothing to reproach myself with in any event. All the same, I am sorry I brought him here, and that you asked him to prolong his visit. I am glad he is going, and I hope we may never hear of him again in connection with anything discreditable and unpleasant.'

With one exception—when he called to say good-bye and receive the price of his property, as per valuation—Mr. Berners saw no more of his undesirable brother-in-law for many years.

Prior to his departure, Langley obtained from the police—not without difficulty—the Spanish knife and the fragment of newspaper which were found near the scene of his wife's murder. In his opinion, as in theirs,

a clue might be found in America—if not there, then nowhere—and he should make it his business to look for one, and, if possible, track the assassin to his doom.

Nor was it without difficulty that he overcame Mrs. Parrox's reluctance to leave her native land 'for foreign parts,' and, as she frankly avowed, she waived her objections solely out of love for her little charge, to whom she was devotedly attached, not in the least out of consideration for him.

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CHAPTER XIX.

IN A MOUNTAIN LAND.

BEFORE the following Sunday Langley, with Irene and her nurse, were *en route* for the Continent. Had the season not been too far advanced to cross the Alps with a young child, he would have gone to Italy. He went no further than Southern Switzerland, accompanied by a courier, whom he engaged in London, and did not dismiss until they were installed in a mountain chalet within easy reach of Montreux.

It was a charming spot, 'all in a garden fair,' commanding a noble view, and sheltered from the north wind by the bold barrier of the Waadtland Alps. Here Langley, still full of his virtuous resolutions, and 'the world forgetting, by the world forgot,' found occupation in household affairs, studying the French language, boating, and shooting wild-fowl on the lake, and hunting chamois in the mountains.

It was an idyllic existence, and for a while he was nearly as happy as he had been in the halcyon days of Birdwood; and being blest with a sanguine temperament and a robust constitution, and living much in the open air, he was in the pink of condition, and had all

the physical enjoyment which comes of perfect digestion and exuberant health.

But few men are content to be tranquilly happy, and Langley was not one of them. Restlessness was in his blood, and when bad weather kept him indoors, he grew weary and yearned for a change—above all, for a change of company. Irene, who grew apace and began to talk very prettily, was a great resource; but even a fond father cannot play with a baby all day long. He did not yet know French well enough to converse at his ease with his peasant neighbours, and even though he had been a master of the language, might not have found their society entertaining.

So it came to pass that on bad days, and sometimes on good days, Langley betook himself to Montreux and Vevey, occasionally to Lausanne, in quest of distraction—excitement in that backwater of the great life stream was past praying for. He would lunch or dine at some hotel, have a talk with an English-speaking visitor, if haply he found one who responded to his advances, or *aute de mieux* with the host—Swiss landlords being generally good linguists—and return to Mon Repos on foot. He was great at walking, and delighted in long tramps.

But his favourite place of call was a café at Vevey, which he discovered by accident. The people whom he met there amused him. They drank sugared water and black coffee, and played dominoes and mysterious games at cards all day long for infinitesimal stakes. Most of them were foreigners, and obviously not in affluent circumstances, yet seemingly merry withal and exceedingly polite. They took Langley—who was well groomed and drank Lafitte with the cheap *table d'hôte* dinner, and

'passed the bottle round'—for an English milord of unlimited means and eccentric habits.

One day, when he was deep in the *Illustrated London News*, which, as also an American paper, the proprietor of the café, who had been a waiter in London and New York, took in, a gentleman near him, with whom he had previously exchanged inquiring looks, but not greetings, said in English:

'After you with the *Illustrated*, sir. . . . I beg your pardon, but I believe you are English?'

The accent was unmistakably insular, else had Langley probably deemed it expedient to answer in the affirmative.

'American,' he said.

'Ah, well, it is pretty much the same thing when you are abroad. All one blood, you know. Been in these parts long? My name is Skipworth.'

Rufus said he had not been long in these parts, and that his name was Langley, and asked his new acquaintance to join him at dinner, which was about to be served. Mr. Skipworth accepted the invitation with alacrity, and ate with appetite and drank with gusto, consuming the greater part of two bottles of bordeaux, and talked amusingly. He was a florid, thick-set little man, with red whiskers and a mottled complexion. His well-brushed garments were threadbare and white at the seams; and from the way he plied his knife and fork, Langley guessed that Mr. Skipworth had not enjoyed a square meal for some time.

The acquaintance thus begun ripened into a quasi-friendship.

Skipworth was a lively companion, an incessant talker, and frank and communicative to a fault.

'I live here because it's cheap, and I am—well, not rich,' he observed to Langley, a day or two after their first interview. 'I was once a subaltern in the Old Tin Bellies——'

'The Old Tin Bellies! Who on earth are they?'

'The Blues—Horse Guards. They wear cuirasses, you know.'

'I see; they are encased in tin.'

'And they have a lot of it, too, some of 'em. Yes, I was a subaltern, and should have had my troop by this time if I had stopped in the regiment; but I got into debt, and went a mucker over the Derby in Phantasmagoria's year, and was obliged to sell out. . . . I have two hundred a year now, paid quarterly; and an uncle of mine, Colonel Blackmore, who has what you Americans call a soft place at the War Office, sends me an occasional tenner. A fellow cannot make much of a splash on two hundred a year, but one may exist—in a fashion. I fake up a letter now and again for a London paper, and might do more, for the editor likes my letters. I sent him a description of Saxon-les-Bains, on which he made me his compliments; but a fellow gets so infernally lazy when he has nothing to do, and I hate writing. . . . What do you say to a game at euchre—for nominal stakes—just to pass the time?'

One of Langley's virtuous resolutions was to gamble no more; but as he saw no harm in playing for pastime and nominal stakes, he said:

'Very well, if you like.'

When they had played an hour, Mr. Skipworth found, to his evident surprise, that he owed Langley fifty francs.

'I will pay you when I get my next quarter's allowance,' quoth he.

On the following days they played again, and by the end of the week Skipworth's losses amounted to five hundred francs.

'I shall have a remittance next week,' he said ruefully. 'Meanwhile I will give you my I O U.'

'Don't worry yourself, my dear fellow,' returned Langley, with a grand seigneur air; 'we were playing for pastime, and I don't want money.'

'You mean——'

'I mean that I consider myself more than paid by the pleasure of your company.'

'You are extremely good, and I am greatly obliged to you. Perhaps I may have an opportunity of discharging my debt in some other way. Why don't you go to Saxon? You are lucky; unfortunately, I am not. I believe you would break the bank.'

Langley, of course, knew that there was a hell at the place in question, but had virtuously resolved to shun danger by keeping it at a distance; for though not an inveterate gamester, he liked a gamble, and knew that if he ventured into the Casino he should be tempted to try his luck at the tables; and thinking of Ida, and recalling the old Latin tag—*Facilis descensus Averni est*—he answered, 'No.' He must stay at home and take care of his little girl.

'And,' he added, 'I don't want to break the bank.'

'What a wonderful man you are!' exclaimed Skipworth, eyeing him enviously. 'You don't want money, and you don't want to break the bank! Yet you are just the sort of man to do it. Money always comes to those who don't want or need it, while moneyless beggars like me must wallow in hopeless poverty. For years have I been doing my best to get on, and here I am

still ; while I venture to say—I'd lay two to one on it—that, if you would only try, you would carry all before you. I wish you would. I'll run down with you any time ; and I can put you up to things.'

Again Langley said ' No,' and the subject dropped.

On calling at the café a few days later, he found that his friend was flown.

' There came for him yesterday a registered letter from England, and the next morning he departed,' said the proprietor, smiling significantly.

From which Langley inferred that Skipworth had received his quarter's allowance and gone to Saxon. Before the week was out he had a letter from him, enclosing another letter addressed to his uncle at the War Office, which he asked Langley to post for him at Vevey or Montreux.

' I dare not post it here,' he wrote. ' Saxon is the mark of the beast.'

And then he went on to say that he had done fairly well at the tables, his gains, so far, being about equal to his losses ; but he had just heard of an infallible system, which he was going to put into immediate operation. Though not a system whereby great profits could be won, it was one by which, carefully worked, a fellow might make a good living. He believed that he should make a thousand (pounds) a year by it.

This was the method of it : You go to the tables fasting, first putting into your right-hand breeches pocket as much money as you intend to risk that day. You begin to play, laying a small stake on whatever number or colour you may fancy. If you win, you put your winnings into your left-hand breeches pocket, and so continue until your other pocket is empty, where-

upon, whether you have won or lost, you drop it and go away. But by faithfully observing these rules, you are cocksure to win in the long-run.'

Langley laughed. He had met the like of Skipworth before, and read him like a book. He was a hopeless, confirmed gambler, and would so remain to his life's end. There is nobody so sanguine, credulous, and superstitious as your inveterate gambler. He believes in lucky and unlucky days and numbers; that fortune may be wooed by turning your chair round, or rising at a certain hour, or fasting for a certain time; and that by conjurations, and combinations, and systems, he can win in spite of fate and mathematics; and though always disappointed, he is never disillusioned. His faith is pathetic—and disastrous.

Langley was a gambler of another order.

It was not in him to do as Skipworth did—save up and half starve himself for months in order that he might play for a week with the odds against him, hoping to win, yet knowing that he must lose. At games in which skill was a factor, Langley played deliberately to win, and generally succeeded; at games of pure chance, or in which the odds were against him, he gambled for excitement—when the fit took him—gained and lost with equal indifference, in the latter event considering that he had received full value for his outlay.

But for Ida's views about gambling, and the respect in which he held her memory, and his solicitude for his daughter, he would probably have needed no second asking to accompany Skipworth to Saxon-les-Bains. He wanted a change, and was pining for a bit of wild excitement.

'I shall hear from this chap again,' he mentally observed, as he put Skipworth's letter in his pocket.

The prevision came true.

After ten days there arrived a letter with the 'mark of the beast.'

'I am done to a turn this time,' it ran—'dead-broke, and no mistake. Haven't enough left to take me to Vevey; and unless I can prevail on old Fama (the concessionaire of the hell) to pay my fare, I shall have to foot it all the way back. All my own fault. I have just as much faith in the system as ever.'

'Of course,' thought Langley, with a laugh.

'Every day for five days running I rose a winner, not of much, yet enough to show that with perseverance I should make a nice penny. But from overnight to past noon the next day is a long time to go without grub, and about eleven on the sixth day I got so ravenously hungry that, feeling I must really have a bit of something, I put myself outside a cold chicken and half a bottle of Pomard. Nor was that all. I had a run of luck, and instead of stopping when I had emptied my right-hand pocket, I staked my winnings, and went on till I had won a thousand francs. This caused me to discard the system. It was a fatal mistake. I plunged, played wildly, and yesterday I staked and lost my last five-franc piece.

'However, I have done one good thing: I have proved the infallibility of the system; and if you will kindly lend me a thousand francs or so, I shall make a fresh start, and I swear by all that I hold most sacred to observe the rules, even though I perish of hunger.

'Instead of interest, I propose to pay you half my winnings.

'It would be still better to come yourself, and let us work on alternate days. That would make it easier for both, unless you preferred to play off your own bat, in which case I'd back you to break the bank, hands down.

'Anyhow, come. You need not gamble, if you don't want; you will find plenty of amusement looking on. There are some of the queerest customers here under the sun—gamesters of every kindred, nation, and tongue, and something always going on.'

Langley laughed again.

'I may as well go,' he mused. 'Why not? I can look on without gambling—in fact, I must not. I have Irene to think for now; and if it were only for her sake, and the respect I owe to her mother's memory. . . . Besides, I cannot afford. I have taken my interest and allowance in advance, and if I should lose—and you are bound to lose at the tables if you play long enough, and when I get excited I am as reckless as anybody—if I were to lose heavily I should be in a hole. . . . I shall just have a look round, and bring that lunatic, Skipworth, back with me, and lend him as much as will keep him till his next pay-day.'

When he told Mrs. Parrox that he was going away for a day or two, she demurred.

'Going away!' she said. 'And what am I to do wi' these lasses' (the two Swiss domestics) 'as I cannot speak a word to, and talks nowt but gibberish? It's bad enough as it is, but wi' you gone, it'll be waur than ever.'

'Only a day or two,' pleaded Langley.

'Only a day or two! That may mean owt. It's like somebody asking you to wait a minute and keeping

you an hour. You'll be gone a week at the very least ; now mark me if you aren't.'

'Certainly not ! Three days at the outside.'

'Very well, if you mun (must) you mun, I suppose,' replied the nurse resignedly ; 'but I'd like you to leave me a directed envelope wi' a stamp on't, so as I can let you know if owt happens to th' child.'

'Now you are croaking, Mrs. Parrox. What can happen to Irene ? She is quite well. I never saw her looking better, and she grows amazingly.'

'That's true ; and she's as healthy and pratty a little wench as ever I had i' my arms, and cutting her teeth fine. But you can never tell wi' childer ; and she has a great deal to go through yet—measles, and croup, and whooping-cough, to say nowt of double teeth—and they've oft convulsions when they're cutting their double teeth—and convulsions is dangerous. I think I'd like a directed envelope, if you'd be so kind.'

'Oh, you shall have the envelope, if it will be any satisfaction to you, though I am sure you will have no occasion to use it. None of the calamities you have mentioned is likely to happen before I get back.'

Whereupon Langley addressed an envelope to himself at the Grand Hôtel des Bains, Saxon-les-Bains, kissed his little girl, and started on his journey, somewhat reluctantly, and fully resolved to return within three days ; for though he made light of Mrs. Parrox's forebodings, they left an impress on his mind, and imparted an unpleasant flavour to his thoughts.

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CHAPTER XX.

HIGH PLAY AND LOW COMPANY.

LANGLEY found his friend where he expected to find him—in the Casino, watching the play longingly, and looking very g'um. But when he spied Langley, his face brightened into smiles.

'I am very glad to see you,' he said, as they shook hands. 'So kind of you to come. I thought, somehow, you would come. Will you have a turn?'—glancing at the tables.

'I think not. How are you getting on?'

'Only so-so; but perhaps as well as a fellow who has not a brass farthing to bless himself with can expect to get on. I am on the wrong side of my breakfast, too, and it is past three.'

'Come and have some, then.'

'Thank you; but I should like to try my luck at trente et quarante first—if you would oblige me with the loan of fifty francs or so for as many minutes. I am just in condition for working the system—pockets and bread-basket all empty.'

'Bother your system! Anyhow, it will wait. Come along and fill your bread-basket.'

'As you like. Yet it seems a pity to miss the chance, and I feel quite sure that in half an hour——'

'Come along, I say.'

And Langley led the broken gamester away to the hotel, and joined him at a square meal; for the air in the Rhone Valley was keen, and the journey had sharpened his appetite.

'I am going to take you back with me,' he said, when they were through with their soup.

'You are very kind. When were you thinking——'

'To-morrow or the next day. Twenty-four hours at Saxon will be about enough, I think. It seems only a one-horse sort of place.'

Skipworth's countenance fell.

'Without working the system?' he asked in dismay.

'Well, it doesn't seem to have done much for you so far.'

'It was my own fault, I assure you—absolutely my own fault. I ruined my chance by breaking the rules. Another time I won't be such a fool, and if you will kindly lend me a thousand francs—or even a hundred!' exclaimed Skipworth eagerly, and quivering with excitement.

'You think you could win something?'

'I am sure. A hundred francs would do to begin with, and you shall have half my winnings—if you don't care to play yourself.'

'Well, so far as a hundred-franc bill goes—— But you know as well as I do that at rouge et noir the chance of a *refait* is one in sixty-four deals, while at roulette the odds in favour of the bank are in the proportion of nineteen to eighteen.'

'That's true,' admitted Skipworth reluctantly. 'But you may have a run of luck.'

'So may the bank.'

'And it is possible by careful play and a system—above all, a system—it is possible to equalize the odds. As I told you before, I know a man who gambles regularly all the year round and makes a handsome living.'

'It may suit him to say so; but don't you believe him. He gambles either for excitement or amusement, and pays for his fun out of his income or his capital, if he has any, and then pretends that he is cleverer than anybody else and always wins. He plays for small stakes, I suppose?'

'Yes, he always limits his risk.'

'I thought so. There are some men who take as much pleasure in playing low as high, and have self-restraint enough to stop when they have lost as much as they can afford. But everybody is not made in that way—you, for one.'

Neither was Langley, and he knew it.

There had been a time when he would have gone to the tables without hesitation and beggared himself without remorse.

The craving was on him now, and he had been arguing less for Skipworth's benefit than his own. He knew that if he once began he should go on as recklessly as of yore, and sought, by repeating every argument against gambling he could recall, to reinforce his waning resolve to play no more.

Meanwhile, Skipworth, who did not shine in argument, had been pondering the *pros* and *cons*, and thinking what answer he could make.

'You say,' he observed at length, 'that nobody ever wins at roulette and rouge et noir?'

'In the long-run,' interposed Langley, 'the bank is bound to win, therefore in the long-run players are bound to lose.'

'All the same, some players do win and take away a lot more money than they brought. There is a Spanish fellow here now—Señor Don Ramon Sarasta, he calls himself—who has won every day this week. Last night he got the better of the bank to the tune of ten thousand francs, and his total gains since I came must tot up to at least twenty-five thousand francs.'

'He has not done yet?'

'That is his own affair. Anyhow, he has won up to now, and they say if he wins again to-night he will go away to-morrow. And he did the same last year—came with a capital of five thousand, and left with thirty.'

'Does he play roulette or rouge et noir?' asked Langley, with interest.

'Rouge et noir, generally. He begins with small stakes, choosing nearly always *couleur* or *l'inverse*, seldom black or white. Then, as he warms to his work, he plays higher, but never recklessly, rather with a sort of bold caution, changing from one colour to another till he gets a run, and then goes ahead. I wish I knew his system'—sighing. 'I'd give a thousand pounds for it, if I had the money.'

'It would be the worst deal you ever made in your life. Systems are all rot. Gambling is like riding for a fall—if you will gamble, you must go at it and take your chance. But it is better to let it alone; that is what I mean to do. . . . You say this Señor Don What's-his-name prefers trente et quarante to roulette.

Now, if I were going to play, I think I should try roulette. Not that you are any less sure of losing your money one way than another. But there is an excitement and a fascination in watching the spinning of the wheel and the revolutions of the ball which you don't find in backing a colour, and the manipulation of six packs of cards by two *tailleurs*.'

'You seem to know a good deal about it.'

'Why, yes. I have had opportunities of studying the game at New Orleans, and elsewhere. . . . You say this Spanish plunger plays again to-night?'

'No doubt he will. At any rate, they say so. Would you like to watch him a while?'

'Well, I think I should, just for a few minutes.'

'All right. When we have finished dinner—it is both breakfast and dinner to me—we'll go into the Casino. You will be entertained, even though you don't play. But I should certainly like you to take the shine out of Señor Sarasta, and, 'pon my soul, I think you might. I am sure you were born under a lucky star.'

'I born under a lucky star? By Gad, Skipworth, you were never more mistaken in your life! If you only knew! Born under a lucky star!' exclaimed Langley passionately. Then, after a mocking laugh, he became moodily silent.

The remark was unfortunate and ill-timed, re-awakening echoes that had better have been left dormant, and intensifying the craving for excitement which he was trying to suppress.

Skipworth, seeing that he had made a bad shot, took up another subject, and proposed a change of venue.

'Suppose we go into the Casino?' he said.

Langley, still taciturn and gloomy, rose from his

chair, offered Skipworth a cigar, took one himself, and they went out, silently smoking. On the promenade they met, among others, two men engaged in a lively conversation, and talking loudly in a strange tongue.

'That,' observed Skipworth, indicating one of them, 'is Señor Don Ramon Sarasta.'

The gentleman in question was tall, well built, and perhaps thirty years old, had a somewhat long face and reddish-brown skin, black, deep-sunk eyes, under heavy brows, long, lank hair, a thick moustache, with tapering, well-waxed points, *à la* Louis Bonaparte, and a pointed beard.

'He is no Spaniard,' said Langley, after giving him a second look.

'He says he is.'

'Are you sure?'

'I have been told so, and people say he is.'

'That may be. Señor Sarasta is a Mexican with Indian blood in his veins.'

'How do you know that, may I ask?'

'I know by his accent and intonation that he is a Mexican. His long, straight hair and an indefinable something in his face leave no doubt in my mind that one of his forefathers or foremothers belonged to the Aztec race.'

'You know Spanish, then, and have been in Mexico?'

'Yes, I know Spanish, and have been in Mexico.'

'What are they talking about, these two?'

'Mexican politics—another proof of the correctness of my diagnosis.'

'Mexicans are great gamblers, I've heard say?'

'Rather; they play monte all day long—some of them, I verily believe, from the cradle to the grave.'

By this time Langley and his companion were in the Casino.

Play was in full swing. The people present were almost without exception confirmed gamblers. Nobody at that time went to Saxon in the depth of winter—nobody goes now—merely to take baths and drink the waters. And a motley crew they were—Boyards from Russia, Jews from Hamburg, doms from Portugal, and dons from Spain; Germans from Berlin and elsewhere, Bulgars from the Danube, Creoles from the Antilles, sharpers from America, swindlers from France, blacklegs from England, and fools from everywhere—some with money in their purses and balances at their bankers; others whose pale faces and furtive eyes bespoke dwindling resources and incipient ruin; others, again, who, albeit they had staked and lost their last dollar, were unable to tear themselves away from the scene of their discomfiture and ruin.

There were also specimens of the fair sex, for the most part with repellent looks—rouged, overdressed, and brilliant with flash jewellery and false gems—and even elderly ladies with gray hair and furrowed cheeks, who staked gold pieces with wrinkled fingers, and gloated over their winnings with age-dimmed eyes.

The Casino was rightly called a hell.

‘Could you let me have a little money—a hundred francs would do for a beginning?’ asked Skipworth, in a deferential whisper.

‘I thought you were only going to play fasting,’ returned Langley, with an amused smile.

‘You were right. I was forgetting. To-morrow morning, then?’

‘I wouldn’t advise you. However, we shall see.’

Presently entered Señor Don Ramon Sarasta, with a lordly air, and smiling urbanely. Everybody stared at him, many greeted him. One of the players at the trente et quarante table offered him his chair. The Mexican took it with a gracious 'Merci, monsieur,' as though it were his by right.

He began by staking twenty francs on *l'inverse*, which he lost; then another twenty, and lost that; and so on, always on the same colour, until he had lost a hundred francs. Then he put fifty on red and won, next a hundred, and won again, and continued until he had gained a thousand.

'Didn't I tell you!' whispered Skipworth excitedly to Langley, who was watching the game from the opposite side of the table.

'Wait a bit,' answered Langley quietly, though he was really no less excited than Skipworth.

The play went on with varying fortunes, but greatly in favour of Sarasta, who within the next hour won at least five thousand francs.

Then the luck changed, and he succeeded in reducing his winnings by one-half. Five times running he staked heavily on black, losing every time.

All this while Langley had been inwardly chafing. The rôle of spectator did not suit him; he wanted to be doing.

Moreover, he had conceived a dislike for the Mexican, and longed, as Skipworth put it, to take the shine out of the fellow.

At length, unable longer to restrain himself, he took a front place, and put a fifty-franc note on the colour that had served Sarasta so ill. He won, and at the next deal risked a hundred, won again, then doubled

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his stake a second time, and so continuing, in five deals won three thousand francs.

In the meantime, Sarasta had lost all he had previously made, and a few hundred francs to boot.

It was now Langley's turn to be stared at. People asked each other who he was, and the Mexican, speaking Spanish, told his companion, who stood behind his chair, to ascertain for him the name and nationality of 'that upstart.'

The play at the trente et quarante table now took the character of a duel between the two men—a mad contest in which both, if they went on, were sure to be discomfited. Langley played as boldly as though he had a bank behind him, instead of against him, winning time after time, until his pockets were stuffed with notes and gold and silver coin, and he had lost count of all his gains.

Then he lost a thousand francs on a single deal, and a word of wisdom came from an unexpected quarter.

'You had better stop,' whispered Skipworth. 'You have done brilliantly, as I knew you would; but I should not tempt Fortune any more to-night, if I were you.'

This advice was not altogether disinterested. Skipworth thought that if Langley left off before his gains were materially diminished, he could not well refuse him the means of working his breeches-pocket system on the morrow.

'I think you are right,' said Langley, after a moment's thought. 'The luck seems to have turned, and enough is as good as a feast. Let us go.'

As he rose, Sarasta gave him a half-angry, half-contemptuous glance, which Langley returned with interest.

‘How has the Mexican been doing?’ he asked Skipworth, when they were away from the crowd. ‘I was too much absorbed in my own play to watch his.’

‘He has lost about as much as you have gained, I should say; and wild he looked, too, as if he would like to eat you.’

‘Why should he want to eat me?’

‘I suppose he thinks your coming has somehow spoiled his luck. You know what absurd ideas gamblers have sometimes. By-the-by, how much have you gained—twenty thousand?’

‘I have no idea. Come with me to the hotel and we will figure it out. I know exactly how much I had when I began.’

They locked themselves in Langley’s room, sorted the notes, and counted the gold and silver coin which he had in his pockets, and in the result found that his winnings amounted to thirty-two thousand francs.

‘Didn’t I tell you!’ exclaimed Skipworth gleefully.

‘You did, and here’s the odd two thousand for doing it.’

‘As a loan?’

‘No, as a present, if you will oblige me by accepting it.’

‘With pleasure. Thank you, old man; and if I don’t double it by this time next week, call me a duffer.’

Langley made no answer. He did not like being called ‘old man.’ It was too suggestive, and misgivings were beginning to assail his mind; but he said no more about going away in the morning.

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CHAPTER XXI.

THE LUCK CHANGES.

'I CANNOT persuade you, then?' observed Langley, as he sat down to his late breakfast—Skipworth, dying to eat, yet resolved not to break his fast, looking on.

'No, I shall not take anything at present.'

'You think it would be bad for your system?'

'Ruinous. . . . But'—brightly, as though he had conceived a happy thought—'don't you think a fellow might smoke? The system has no rule against tobacco.'

'Smoke, then, by all means.'

Skipworth lighted a cigar.

'You will play again, I suppose?'

'I am not sure. If I were a wise man, I should quit Saxon right away.'

'That would be foolish. You have only just begun. Why, Señor Sarasta won seventy thousand francs at one sitting, and he would be delighted if you were to go. He would say you had not the courage to follow up your luck, and swagger more than ever.'

'Yes, he looks as though he would like to boss the show. Well, I think I must have another try. I have thirty thousand francs to the good.'

'That's just it; you can lose that much without

trenching on your capital. Better still, you may put the big pot on. Twopenny-halfpenny stakes are no good for a man like you. . . . They say La Comtesse is back. If so, we shall have another player to-night.'

'Who is she?'

'The Graefin von Winterbach she calls herself. La Comtesse she is generally called at Saxon. An inveterate gamester, and a deuced fine woman. She and Sarasta were very thick the last time I was here. Often, when he seemed to be in the vein, she would get him to stake for her. Yes, a deuced fine woman. All the same, I rather think——'

'What?'

'That her title of nobility is self-conferred.'

'Is that allowed?'

'Oh, you may call yourself anything you like in Switzerland, especially at Saxon-les-Bains. All they want here is your money—they ask for nothing else—and, by Jingo! they generally get it.'

Later in the day the two friends—for friends they now were—betook themselves to the Casino.

Skipworth went to the roulette-table intent on emptying his right-hand breeches pocket—for he was still on the wrong side of his breakfast—Langley to the rouge et noir table, where he took his old place opposite Señor Sarasta, who had already begun to play, and seemed to be losing.

Langley had been playing a winning game for half an hour, when somebody touched his shoulder lightly, and said, *sotto voce* :

'Pardon, monsieur! You are winning—you are lucky. I have heard how Fortune favoured you last night.

Would you kindly stake this louis for me—on any colour you may fancy?’

Langley looked round, and, seeing that the speaker was a lady, offered her his chair.

‘No, no; keep your place,’ she said pleasantly, albeit somewhat peremptorily. ‘I want you to play for me.’

‘With pleasure,’ he answered, bowing.

‘The Countess,’ he thought. ‘Skipworth was right; she is a fine woman.’

He put her louis on red, and won, and at her request staked the original louis, and all it had produced, on the same colour, and won as much more as made her gains five hundred francs, which the Countess, after thanking him graciously, put in her *portemonnaie*.

‘You are very good, as well as lucky,’ she said, smiling sweetly. ‘I shall trouble you another time—if I may.’

‘Of course you may. I shall be only too delighted,’ returned Langley gallantly, and then resumed his interrupted play, albeit less successfully than on the previous day. He increased the sum of his winnings by twenty thousand francs. Skipworth won fifty.

‘I could have made two or three times as much if I had not been so deuced hungry,’ he said plaintively. ‘It was awful. I could not wait a minute longer. I shall have a big supper the last thing before I turn in. That should carry me on till three or four o’clock p.m. to-morrow. So the Countess asked you to play for her? I hear that Sarasta is as mad as a meat-axe about it.’

‘Is he, indeed? I thought he did not seem very well pleased.’

‘Well, he isn’t. Not, I dare say, that he cares so much about her, as that it vexes him to see that, like a

good many other people, she regards you as the rising sun.'

Langley was now fairly launched, and drifting down the rapids. He continued to gamble and to win. He was intoxicated with adulation and success; people toadied him; he began to believe blindly in his luck, and to imagine that, whatever might be the case with others, he, at least, should be able to evade the laws which he had so clearly expounded to Skipworth, and keep and increase his gains, despite the odds in favour of the bank. The man was *fey*. His worst nature was again in the ascendant. The sordid, soul-destroying environment of the place had quenched, for the time being, all his better impulses. Ida and the happy time at Birdwood were as they had never been. Even Irene was well-nigh forgotten, and his return to Mon Repos indefinitely postponed.

Moreover, gambling at the tables was not enough for him. He gave suppers to all and sundry, and played poker and unlimited loo with his guests into the small hours; but the sums that changed hands were not small. In ten days Langley won, one way and another, upwards of a hundred thousand francs.

Even Skipworth, whose notions were lax enough in all conscience, was surprised by his friend's rapid deterioration, and alarmed by his recklessness.

'Hadn't you better put the brake on?' he said one day. 'You have made a fine haul, and I have not done badly. Let us go home, put our money in a safe place, and come again another day. The luck may turn. They say Sarasta is nearly cleared out. The Countess cut him dead yesterday.'

'That is like her, hitting a man when he is down.

She is an out-and-out adventuress ; anybody may see that.'

'Why are you so thick with her, then ?'

'To spite the Mexican. As for going away, I shall go when he is dead broke—not before, unless I win a million francs in the meanwhile. We will quit then, if you like.'

He won thirty thousand the same night, thereby increasing his winnings to a hundred and fifty thousand.

This was the high-water mark of Langley's fortunes at Saxon-les-Bains. On the following day there came a portentous change. The fickle goddess deserted him. He lost 'hand over fist.' A hundred thousand went in three nights. In vain he tried every dodge and combination he could think of to better his luck. The tide of disaster rolled on without surcease. A few days and all his gains were swept away.

His losses became the talk of the place. To make matters worse, the Mexican began to win again, and the Countess shamelessly deserted to the enemy—gave Langley the go-by, and asked his rival to play for her.

Then Langley, wild with disappointment and rage, yet determined not to be beaten, drew on his London bankers for the sum of twelve hundred pounds, which he had placed with them on deposit as the nucleus of a fund for the purchase of land in America.

After a brief interlude of brighter fortune, this, too, sank in the quicksands.

Save for something less than a thousand francs, the poor remnant of his gains, all Langley had now left was about three hundred pounds, in the hands of a banker at Lausanne, and he would be unable to draw

on Berners Brothers for his next half-year's dividend before July.

'No matter,' he thought; 'I'll either retrieve my losses or lose my last cent.'

So he drew out a cheque on the Lausanne firm, and took it with him to the Casino, intending to use it in case of need.

He was in a savage and quarrelsome mood, and seeing Sarasta's chair vacant, took it.

The next minute came Sarasta, the Countess on his arm.

'I think, monsieur, you have made a mistake,' he said haughtily. 'This is my place.'

'First come first served,' returned Langley insolently. 'Here I am, and here I shall stay.'

The Mexican put his hand on the back of the chair, and gave its occupant a push.

'Hands off!' cried Langley, and springing to his feet, gave Sarasta a blow in the face.

On this there was a great commotion. All the loiterers rushed to the spot; men exclaimed, women screamed, the Countess pretended to faint, the croupiers stopped the play and put their cash in safe keeping, and the Mexican, boiling with rage, drew a knife.

But the bystanders laid hold of him, and so prevented further mischief, for Langley had also drawn a knife.

'You shall pay for this, pig of a Yankee!' shouted Sarasta, as his friends led him away.

'You have done it now, and no mistake!' said Skipworth, taking his friend's arm. 'He will challenge you, of course, and from the look of him he means mischief.'

'So much the better. I am spoiling for a fight. . . .

If anybody wants me I shall be found at the Hôtel des Bains.' (Loudly, and looking defiantly round.) 'You will see me through this, Skipworth. Who is there? Ah! that German swashbuckler of a fellow—Von Ernstein—just the man. He will act with you.'

'He was about just now. Shall I look him up?'

'By all means, if you will be so kind, and follow me to the hotel. I must be quite prepared for Sarasta's emissaries. They won't be long in coming, you bet, and the sooner they come the better I shall be pleased.'

Skipworth was at the hotel almost as soon as Langley himself, followed in a few minutes by Sarasta's seconds, who, with a great parade of politeness, demanded, on the part of their principal, an abject apology or a meeting.

'The meeting, of course. I accept Señor Don Ramon Sarasta's challenge with pleasure,' returned Langley, quietly and courteously, 'and I am sure he asks for nothing better. As to time and place, I put myself unreservedly in the hands of my seconds, Mr. Skipworth and Captain von Ernstein, and yourselves.'

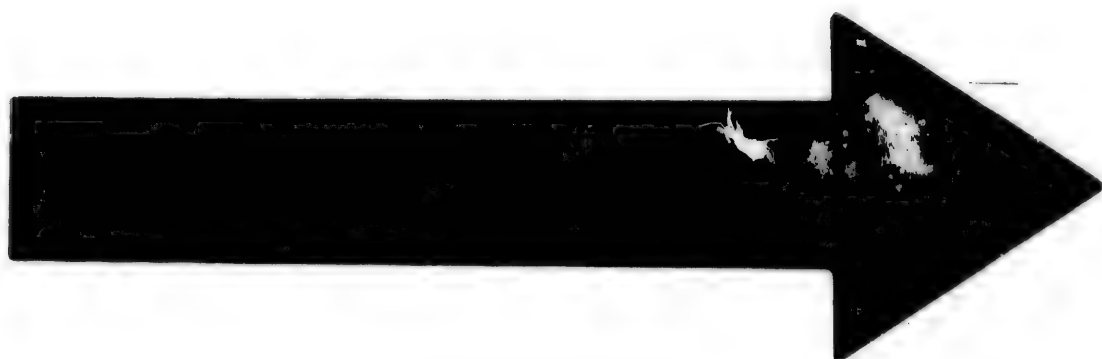
'And weapons? The choice is yours.'

'Then I choose pistols.'

On this the three men went away to concert measures with Von Ernstein for the forthcoming duel, and Langley betook himself to his own salon—a spacious, handsomely-furnished room, for since he became a notability he had lived *en prince*.

On the table lay a letter, the first he had received since his arrival at Saxon. It was addressed to himself in his own handwriting.

'From Mrs. Parrox,' he murmured. 'What about, I wonder?'



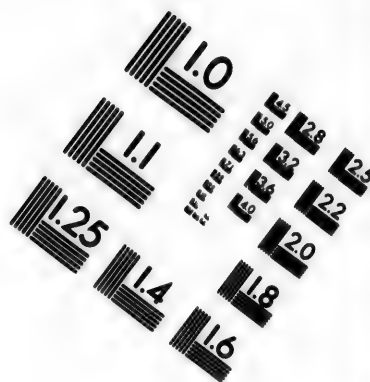
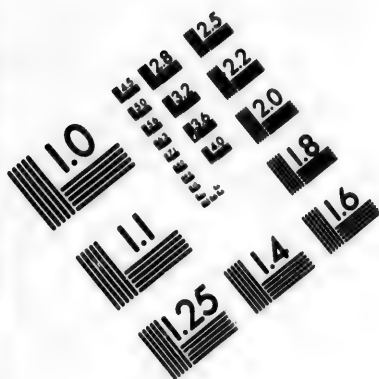
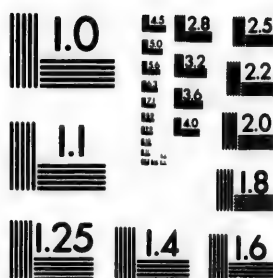


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He had forgotten her croakings on the eve of his departure. The letter contained only three lines, for the nurse wrote and spelt with difficulty:

‘Irene’s took very bad, and the doktor sez as you’d better get back as soon as you can, and the child is always asking for you.’

It was like a bolt from the blue, or the breaking of a hideous spell by the touch of a wizard’s wand.

Langley sank into a chair, and covered his face with his hands.

‘Irene is ill! Oh, my darling! my darling!’ he cried passionately. ‘Sick, and—who knows?—perhaps like to die. Taken very bad and a doctor called in! And she is always asking for me, my little pet! And while she has been suffering I have been wasting my substance in this hell. I am a brute—a brute and a fool. What would Ida think if she knew? If—if! How do I know that she does not? . . . Forgive me, Ida! By Heaven, I’ll order an extra post-waggon, and go this very night! But no, that would be showing the white feather. I must fight this Mexican first—the foul fiend take him! But for him I shouldn’t have stayed in this cursed place three days. And my darling is calling for me. Fool, idiot, dolt! Only fifteen hundred left out of nearly eight thousand. But never more—never more: I swear to you, Ida, never more.’

His self-reproaches were interrupted by the opening of the door.

The intruder was Skipworth.

‘It’s all arranged,’ he began. ‘The rendezvous is in a sequestered spot, two miles south of the town, on the

Martigny road; the time sunrise. . . . But what's the matter? You are pale and agitated, you——'

Here Skipworth turned pale too. He feared that his man was showing the white feather.

Langley guessed what was in his mind.

'It is not because I am afraid,' he said, pulling himself together. 'I have had bad news. My little girl is sick. I must be away from here by eight o'clock to-morrow morning.'

'But that is the hour fixed for the duel. The sun does not rise till nearly eight.'

'The duel will not take many minutes. I shall drive right away from the ground.'

'But—but,' repeated Skipworth, with a bewildered look, 'you don't know—nobody can tell how the affair will end.'

'I do. I shall kill this Mexican ruffian before I start.'

'Well, 'pon my word! I always said you were a cool hand, but this beats cock-fighting! They say Sarasta is a dead shot.'

'So am I, as you shall see.'

'All the same, I wouldn't advise you to kill him—if you want to start early.'

'Why? Is there a law against duelling in this canton?'

'Yes; but it is seldom enforced. No notice is taken in ordinary cases, but when one of the parties is killed there is always an inquiry and a lot of bother, and you might be detained or fetched back.'

'In that case I shall fire low. How about the pistols?'

'That's arranged also. Ernstein will lend you his, as pretty a pair as ever you set eyes on—beautifully balanced, and warranted neither to kick nor miss fire.'

And I have undertaken to retain a surgeon, and shall do so presently.'

'Well, everything appears to be in order, and I am greatly obliged for the trouble you are taking. Will you go with me?'

'To the ground? Of course I must.'

'To Montreux. I shall be glad of your company.'

Skipworth hesitated.

'I think you had better, and I should take it as a favour.'

'Well, if you put it in that way, I will go with you.'

'You are very good. How have you been going on the last day or two at the tables?'

'Only so-so, I am sorry to say.'

'The system has failed you, then?'

'Not at all. It is I who have failed the system. It happened the night before last. I was in high feather, winning all before me; but, unfortunately, in my excitement I forgot myself, put my winnings in my right-hand pocket, and staked what I had in the other—got regularly mixed up. The consequence was that I lost all that I had won—and more; for whereas I had three thousand francs, I have only fifteen hundred now.'

'Take it home with you, and cut the tables for ever.'

'A nice man you are to pose as a Mentor.'

'I am better than a Mentor—I am a warning.'

'Well, I told you to put the brake on.'

'You did, and I was a fool not to follow your advice; and but for that infernal Sarasta I should have done.'

It was always Sarasta, though before they fell out neither had ever spoken to the other, and Langley had deliberately provoked a quarrel which might cost one of them his life. He blamed himself bitterly, and con-

fessed his folly, yet tried to extenuate himself by blaming another, albeit the other had done nothing worse than return his looks of hatred and defiance.

It was ever so. The woman sins and blames the serpent, the man sins and blames the woman; but if the serpent could be heard, he might tell another tale.

Before the friends parted it was arranged that they should breakfast together at seven, and start for the rendezvous at half-past, calling for Ernstein and the surgeon *en route*.

Then Skipworth went away, and Langley was once more alone with his thoughts.

CHAPTER XXII.

A PORTENTOUS SUMMONS.

A BLOOD-RED sun, rising from behind the Pierre à Voir, looked down on the desolate valley, white with snow, and a pale river sullenly surging between icy banks.

In a by-road near the river, and not far from the highway to Martigny and Sion, were three carriages; in a field hard by, eight men. Four of them were gathered together, earnestly talking. These were the seconds. Langley and the surgeon were walking about and stamping their feet on the frozen ground, for the morning was bitterly cold. Two others, one of whom was Sarasta, were industriously following their example.

Presently the seconds separated and joined their principals.

'There seems to be one too many,' observed Langley to Skipworth. 'Who is that with Sarasta?'

'Another surgeon. Cartouche, one of Sarasta's seconds, was not sure that I should bring one; and it is better so. It appears that the law or custom of this country insists on six witnesses.'

The men were to be so placed—at a distance from each other of twenty-four paces—that neither should have any advantage in the way of position or light—

an arrangement which the hour and locality rendered quite practicable.

In the event of neither party being hit at the first fire, they were to advance each two paces and fire again, and so on until one or other of them should be disabled.

It was to be a duel *à outrance*.

When the ground had been stepped by Von Ernstein, the men were placed in position.

Cartouche, who held a cocked pistol in one hand and a white handkerchief in the other, was to give the signal.

'When I drop the handkerchief, fire,' he said, 'and if either fires too soon, I shall fire at him. Attention!'

Cartouche shook out his handkerchief, and as it fluttered to the ground the two pistols went off with a single report.

Sarasta made a half-turn, and then sank in a heap on the snow; but Langley stood erect, with outstretched arm.

'Are you hit?' asked Skipworth, running up to him.

'Yes'—glancing at a rent in his coat-sleeve, from which the blood was beginning to well. 'But it is only a slight flesh wound—no bones broken. You see, I can move my arm all right'—suited the action to the word.

'Allow me!' said the surgeon; and producing his pocket-case, he took out a pair of scissors and slit up the sleeve. 'A flesh wound, certainly; but not a slight one, by any means. The muscles are ploughed up for several inches, and the bullet has made its exit at the point of the shoulder. I will bind it up, and when we get to the hotel it must be stitched.'

'Stitch it up now, doctor, if you please. I am going to Montreux in that carriage.'

'Impossible!'

'Impossible or not, I shall go, stitched or unstitched.'

'You are very unwise, and consequences may be serious. Nevertheless, it is your affair, not mine, and if you are resolved——'

'I am—quite resolved.'

'As you will, sir.'

Whereupon, without further delay, the surgeon set to work, Skipworth standing by with the instrument case, and lending a hand when necessary.

Presently Ernstein, who had been to inquire about Sarasta, reported that the Mexican had been hit in the region of the hip-joint, and that the extraction of the bullet would be attended with difficulty.

'I told you I should spoil his dancing,' said Langley to Skipworth. 'However, he has come off better than he might have done. If I had not aimed low, I should have killed him.'

'Well, he meant to kill you. He told Cartouche so, and Cartouche fully believed that he would do it,' observed Ernstein.

'And would have done if he had aimed a little higher. I thought he meant mischief, and but for certain considerations—— However, it is perhaps as well as it is. Sarasta is badly hurt, and I am only scratched.'

When the dressing was finished, the doctor advised his patient to take a nip of cognac.

Langley declined.

'No,' said he, 'I don't believe in giving stimulants, except where there is a danger of collapse. I seldom gave them to the boys when they were hurt, and I think they got better all the sooner.'

'Oh, you are a surgeon, then?'

'Not exactly—say half. But I have seen a good many gunshot wounds.'

Langley paid the doctor his fee, and shook hands with him and Ernstein; and as Skipworth and himself stepped into one carriage, Sarasta was being driven away in another.

The journey to Montreux was long and trying. As the sun gained power the snow began to melt, and, mixing with the slowly-softening mud, made the roads heavy and progress slow. For at least one-half the way the horses could go no faster than a walk.

Langley, whose wounded arm had been placed in a sling, leaned back in his corner, with shut eyes. Though he had made light of his hurt, the pain of it was great; and he suffered almost as acutely in mind as in body. Beforetime he had scattered his money—in gambling or otherwise—with a light heart, knowing that so long as he possessed a rifle and a horse he could retrieve his fortunes—either by fair means or foul. But he was neither on the Mexican border nor in Western wilds, and scalp-hunting and cattle-raiding were not practicable in Europe. Short of highway robbery or a big swindle, he saw no way of making good the twelve hundred pounds sunk in the quicksands of Saxon, with which, after tracking Ida's murderer, he had intended to settle in some part of the States where he was either forgotten or unknown. Moreover, he had renounced crooked courses.

Also Langley was conscious of having been an egregious fool, and that is a feeling which does not make for peace of mind. He was a fool for playing at all, and a still greater fool for not stopping when the luck turned.

True, he might wait and save, and with care the remnant of his ready cash would last until he could draw on Berners Brothers for his next year's dividends. But what should he do in the meantime? An active life was a necessity for him.

Vegetating seven or eight months at Montreux would be almost as intolerable as pining seven or eight months in a prison, and he should lose precious time. The longer the quest was delayed, the less likely was it to succeed. On the other hand, going to America immediately was out of the question. The few hundred dollars which would be all he should have left, after settling up at Montreux and paying his way to some place out West, would be altogether inadequate, even though he should make up his mind to live like an anchorite and travel on the cheap.

But Langley's greatest anxiety was Irene. Should he find her alive? And if not— But that was a contingency he could not face, and refused to consider. He thrust the idea from him. Why had he left her? The thought that she had asked for him—that she might even then be crying for him—and that he was not there to take her in his arms and soothe and comfort her, was madness. Mrs. Parrox was all very well, and a good nurse, but she could not feel for the child like a father or a mother—and mother poor Irene had none. She had only him, and he had left her with hirelings. Worse still, he had gambled away her money, money which he had received for her maintenance, and had not the nurse's summons recalled him to his senses, he would have gone back a beggar, unable, without asking charity from his wife's relatives, to provide the child with bread.

For the first time in his life (though he had known generous impulses and done some commendable actions), Langley felt twinges of conscience and endured remorse.

Meanwhile, Skipworth, knowing that his fellow-traveller must be in pain, and seeing that he wanted to be quiet, sat still and held his peace for a full hour—a wonderful achievement for a man of his mercurial temperament and talkative disposition. But after a while the ordeal became too much for him, and he inquired how Langley felt.

'Oh, pretty well,' was the answer, and save that 'well' ought to have been 'ill' (in common parlance, 'bad'), a true answer.

'Arm pain you much?'

'It smarts a little, naturally, but nothing to speak of.'

'Can I get you anything—wine, brandy?'

'No, thanks. I have a theory that alcohol, however much diluted, inflames a wound. I am better without it.'

'Well, as you say you are half a doctor, you ought to know. But tobacco won't hurt your wound. Take a weed'—offering his cigar-case. 'It will help to pass the time.'

Langley took the proffered cigar, to Skipworth's great delight. He had been dying for a smoke, but hesitated to 'light up,' lest he should incommode his friend; while the latter, on his part, hoped that smoking would be conducive to silence.

In this, however, he was mistaken. Once Skipworth's tongue was loosened he never knew when to stop.

'Shall you go to Saxon again?' was his next question.

'Never!' answered Langley emphatically.

'Are you very hard hit?'

'You saw the wound—oh, you mean financially? Harder than I like, a good deal.'

'I am sorry for that. I should be sorry in any case; but as I was the means of your going——'

'Don't say a word. I went of my own free will, and I ought to have shut down when I had made my pile.'

'That's true. But who does? Look here! You gave me two thousand when we were flush. It is still nearly intact, and at your disposal—in fact, I shall be very glad if you will take it back. I was never good at keeping money; it always seems to slip through my fingers.'

Langley was both surprised and touched. He had not deemed Skipworth capable of so much self-denial.

'You are very kind, and I am greatly obliged to you,' he said. 'But what would you do?'

'Oh, I shall rub along somehow until I get another remittance. I am not without credit. People know that I always pay in the end, and old Imboden, the café-keeper, is a never-failing help in times of dearth. He will always lend a fellow a hundred—when he thinks he is sure of getting it back.'

'I should be very sorry to put you to such straits. Besides, I don't need it. I have as much as will keep the pot boiling until I get more. Thanks, all the same.'

'Anyhow, you will take care of it for me? If I keep it in my own possession, I am sure to go back to Saxon. That place has an irresistible attraction for me. I wish it were blown up or razed to the ground, or that Old Nick would carry it off bodily—at any rate, old Fama and his croupiers—and drop them into the crater of Mount Vesuvius. Take the money, and dole it out to me at the rate of fifty francs a week—no more, an thou

lovest me. Not another sou, even though I should go on my marrow-bones and beseech you with tears.'

'If you will, have it so. You are in a penitent mood, I think.'

'Hardly that, I should say. Penitence leads to amendment, and I fear I shall never mend. Anyhow, I have felt the same before, and you see how little has come of it. I have a lucid interval, that is all, and want to make provision against my next accession of insanity. Prevention is better than cure, they say. Here is the money, nineteen hundred francs. I retain fifty francs. This day week I shall call on you for another fifty.'

'What time do you think we shall arrive?' asked Langley, as he put the money in his pocket.

'At this rate, not before three. The roads worsen.'

They did not arrive until past four. As Langley could mount to Mon Repos on foot faster than the tired horses could drag the carriage, he alighted at the outskirts of Montreux, and, after shaking hands with Skipworth, who was going on to Vevey, engaged a man to carry his kit, and finished his journey on foot.

Outpacing the heavy-footed porter, he reached the chalet in a few minutes, breathless with running, and sick with apprehension.

The door was opened by one of the Swiss maids.

'The little one, how is she?' he gasped, and tried to read his answer in her face.

'Très souffrante, monsieur, but no worse than yesterday. M. le Docteur Morillon is with her now.'

Langley, throwing off his hat, ran upstairs, and, after pausing for a moment to take breath and collect himself, entered the sick-room.

Mrs. Parrox and a gentleman with white hair and a benign yet powerful face were bending over Irene's cot.

Both looked up as he went in, and the doctor bowed gravely. Langley greeted him in French:

'Bon soir, M. le Docteur——'

'He can talk,' interposed Mrs. Parrox.

This meant that the doctor spoke English.

Langley kissed the child passionately. Her face was flushed, her skin burning.

'My darling, don't you know me?' he asked her softly.

'Dada!' she murmured, with a glad smile that went to her father's heart.

'What is it—measles?'—to the doctor.

'Scarlet fever.'

'Good heavens! How did she get it?'

'It is impossible to say. Probably from the milk she has been having. There is a case at the farm.'

'And what is your prognosis, doctor?'

'Favourable, so far. Nevertheless, I am not free from anxiety, and I thought you had better be sent for.'

'By all means. You did quite right, and I am much obliged to Mrs. Parrox for writing.'

'What's th' matter with you?' demanded the nurse bluntly. 'You've gotten your arm in a sling, and look shocking ill.'

'I—have had an accident.'

'An accident! Can I do anything for you?' asked Dr. Morillon.

Langley thanked him, and said that his arm was rather painful, and he should be glad to have it dressed; and the doctor, after giving Mrs. Parrox some directions about Irene, went with his new patient into an adjoining room.

'An accident?' he observed curtly, as he unbound the wound.

'From a pistol-shot.'

'I understand. You have been at Saxon-les-Bains. That accounts for everything.'

And the benign face became hard and stern, and the owner's manner cold. Langley winced, for he felt that this honourable gentleman and good physician set him down as a duellist, a gamester, and a heartless father.

'It is a nasty wound. You will have to take care,' said the doctor, when he had dressed it; and, after remarking that Irene's recovery depended much more on careful nursing than medical treatment, he took his leave.

Langley returned to the sick-room.

'Have you lost much rest, Mrs. Parrox?' he asked her.

'I haven't been i' bed since th' night afore last,' was the answer.

'Well, go now. I shall watch while you sleep.'

'Do you think you can manage?'

'Yes. I heard what the doctor said, and it is not the first time I have sat by a sick-bed.'

'Very well. It's seven o'clock; I'll go and lie down till twelve. There's a letter and some papers for you downstairs. Shali I fetch 'em?'

'No, thank you. They will keep.'

Langley kissed Irene again, and again she smiled and recognised him, and put her little hand in his. Then she seemed disposed to sleep, and he sat there, hour after hour, holding the child's hands, never moving except to minister to her wants, or breaking the stillness of the night save to speak soothing words on the rare occasions when she opened her eyes.

As the clock on the mantelpiece struck twelve, Mrs. Parrox reappeared.

'I've had a fine sleep, and am good for another twenty-four hours' watching,' she said. 'Now, you go to your bed; you look as if you wanted it. Here's the papers and the letter as I told you about.'

Langley, who was suffering from his wound and fevered with his thoughts, kissed the child, took the letter and the papers, and went to his room. Feeling too tired to read, he was laying them aside, when, observing that the letter bore the Liverpool post-mark, fatigue yielded to curiosity, and he broke the seal.

The writer was Richard Berners, and the missive ran as follows :

'I send you by this mail two newspapers, containing several marked passages, to which I beg to call your particular attention. You will see that your name appears in connection with a very unpleasant matter, which, I may add, is causing a great sensation in the town. If you can throw any light on the affair, or show that you acted in good faith, it will be an immense satisfaction to the firm, the family, and myself.'

When Langley had read the letter, he opened one of the newspapers. There was no difficulty in finding the most important of the marked passages. It stared him in the face, with three headlines in large type :

GIGANTIC FRAUD.

WHOLESALE BILL FORGERIES.

CAPTURE OF ONE OF THE SUPPOSED DELINQUENTS.

The story that Langley read in the papers, yet more fully told and somewhat differently presented, will be found in the following pages.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A REGULAR BURST UP.

FOR some time after Langley left Liverpool Hicks went on swimmingly. By adroit manipulation of his account at the Maritime Bank and polite attentions to Mr. Dumford, the manager, he won that gentleman's favour so thoroughly that when inquiries were made touching the firm's credit, his reports were always highly satisfactory. Limbery Hicks, Hart and Co. were described as keeping a good balance, drawing on the best houses, and paying prompt cash for their purchases. All this was true. Mr. Dumford could vouch for the balance and the bills, and as at that time Hicks' purchases had not gone much beyond office furniture and stationery, for which he had naturally to settle on the nail, the facts were strictly in accordance with the manager's confidential statements to potential customers and curious friends.

So it came to pass that when Limbery Hicks, Hart and Co. applied to the Bank of England and Overend, Gurney and Co. for discount facilities, the request in each instance was graciously granted.

They had now, as might seem, the ball at their feet, and Mr. Hart proposed to 'put the big pot on' right

away. But the head of the firm was nothing if not prudent and prescient, and on the principle of leaving as little to chance as might be, they began by feeding the establishments in question with genuine 'gilt-edged paper,' which, as Mr. Hicks sagaciously remarked, would both gain their confidence and whet their appetites.

Meanwhile he had made a discovery which pleased him immensely and greatly facilitated his operations. Money was easy, and he noticed that so long as the names he offered were good, the usance of the bills on which they appeared was hardly regarded.

'When the paper is really tip-top, like this, the date is of no consequence,' said to him a gentleman at Overend, Gurney's, when he called at their office to introduce himself personally and offer his first batch of bills (all genuine). 'I would rather have a Baring, a Brown, or a Rothschild at four or six months than a second-class acceptance at sixty days.'

On this hint Hicks acted. Instead of making his bogus bills 'short,' as he had originally proposed, he drew them at four and six months—an advantage which would enable him to make a bigger haul than he had reckoned upon, and to put a good many thousand miles of land and water between himself and England before the crash came.

The paper was fabricated with the greatest care. The Old Man obtained in London stamps for imprinting the names of the various banks where the firms whose signatures they were going to forge domiciled their acceptances; and Hart, who was an expert penman, took as much pains with his work, and regarded the result with as great satisfaction, as though he had

been a rising painter contending for the highest prizes in his calling. He would spoil twenty bill stamps, and spend a whole day over the forgery of a single bill. But as the imitation was perfect and the amount often ran into four figures, he considered himself amply repaid for his trouble. His predatory and his artistic instincts were alike satisfied.

A great part of the proceeds of the forgeries was remitted to Dalton at Baltimore, with whom it had been arranged beforehand in what manner they should be dealt with. But though Hicks had confidence in his accomplice, he trusted no man implicitly, nor believed in putting all his eggs in one basket; and as his bank balance increased in magnitude—albeit continually drawn upon to add to the secret hoard in the fireproof safe—his mind was much exercised as to the best shape in which to carry off his plunder when the time came for a bolt.

British sovereigns are current in all civilized lands, but they bulk too largely to be carried in thousands on the person, and there is danger in confiding gold coin to boxes and bags. Bank of England notes, though readily convertible in Europe and English-speaking America when you are on the square, are apt to tell tales when you are on the cross, and in certain easily-conceivable circumstances, the mere changing of a note or exhibition of a sovereign might expose the depredators to suspicion, or serve as a clue to their whereabouts.

After much thought, Hicks decided for diamonds. They are so portable that you may put a thousand pounds' worth in your waistcoat pocket, so valuable that you can hide a gem worth a king's ransom in a cigar-case or a plug of tobacco. They bear neither

image nor superscription, and wherever there are jewellers, or pawnbrokers, or women, there is a market for brilliants.

So the head of the firm, after discussing the idea with his colleague, and obtaining letters of introduction to two or three London precious-stone merchants, hied him to the Metropolis and invested largely in diamonds—as he explained to the people from whom he bought them, for shipment to New York; and though he would have nothing inferior, he bought no single gem at a price that might render it unattainable by a man or woman of moderate means.

On his return to Liverpool, Hicks divided the diamonds with his partner, himself, of course, taking the lion's share. He also made other preparations for the eventuality of a precipitate flight, and advised Hart to do likewise.

'We are going on swimmingly,' quoth he. 'Haven't had a single hitch, and not likely to have, so far as I can see. But you can never tell what may happen in this world, and it is well to be prepared for the worst. I hope we shall be under no necessity to quit before the date we have fixed; but if any of the people should smell a rat, our names must be Walker.'

'They will smell no rat—not they,' returned Hart serenely. 'Though I say it as shouldn't say it, the execution of those bills is just perfect. The first that falls due will be paid on presentation, you bet. Until they examine their pass-books and examine their bill-books, the very acceptors won't know them for forgeries.'

'Very likely; but I hope we shall be far enough before they have any occasion to do either the one or the other. Anyhow, I advise you to keep always plenty

of money about you, both English and American, also some of the diamonds.'

Hicks kept part of his in a safe at his lodgings in Sefton Park, the remainder in his inside waistcoat pocket.

A short time previously the Liverpool firm had begun to ship Manchester goods to their house at Baltimore, at first in small parcels, and merely to make it appear as though they were doing a legitimate business; afterwards, when Hicks discovered that the Manchester people were willing to take their reimbursement in drafts on Limbery Hicks, Hart and Co., more largely. The buying house with whom they dealt were, indeed, so delighted with the connection, that their representatives called regularly on Limbery Hicks and Co. with samples and quotations, and when Hicks went to Manchester, the head partner dined him at his club, and otherwise made much of him, and after his departure observed that he had seldom met a smarter or more business-like gentleman.

And then something—or, to be accurate, two things—happened, one of which might have been expected, but did not lead to much, while the precautions taken to prevent the other seemed to render its occurrence impossible, and it led to a great deal.

One day, when Hicks was taking leave of the manager of the Maritime Bank, with whom he had been having a chat, and talking rather loudly, who should come in but Mr. Romaine, to pay in a large sum of money to the credit of one of Berners Brothers' clients. He looked rather hard at Hicks, who bore himself like a man of importance, and though he failed to recognise him, seemed to know his voice. There was a strangely

familiar ring about it, and a voice often lingers longer in the memory than a face.

'Who is that?' he asked one of the bank clerks, as the manager bowed his customer out.

'Mr. Limbery Hicks, firm of Limbery Hicks, Hart and Co., office in Lord Street. They are rather in your line. You should know them.'

'Never heard of them. Not been here long, have they?'

'Only a few months, but they are doing a fine business, all the same.'

Romaine concluded that he could not have heard the voice before. It was quite out of the question. Yet he had certainly heard one very like it. He must have done; it sounded so familiar. But where and when he was unable to recall, and, after worrying awhile, gave it up.

'It will come to me some time. These things always do,' he thought; and it did, only too late.

Shortly after this episode, Hicks had occasion to go to Manchester. Rendel and Co., his friends and correspondents there, had offered the firm an interest in a very promising venture—a large shipment of prints to Peru, which the Manchester people had bought dirt cheap—and Mr. Rendel invited Mr. Hicks to run down on the following Friday to lunch with him and talk the matter over.

Hicks laughed sardonically.

'What the deuce do we want with shipments to Peru?' he said to Hart, handing him the letter. 'Our names will have to be Walker before those precious prints are afloat, unless they hurry up.'

'That's true. All the same, I think you had better

go and accept Rendel's offer. You have nothing better to do, and he will give you a square meal. And while you are away I can be making paper. It is a sort of work that requires concentration of mind. You want to be quiet when you are making paper.'

'All right, I'll go. Besides, it will be in the way of business, and something to crack about the next time I go to the Maritime. Rendel's is a good house. It isn't everybody to whom they would offer a share in a venture to Peru.'

So when Friday came, Limbery went. Before leaving, he told the office-boy and the clerk that he should be back between five and six, and that, anyhow, they must not 'shut up shop' until he returned.

But luckily for him his stay in Manchester was shorter than he anticipated. When he had lunched with Mr. Rendel, heard that gentleman's proposals, and allowed himself to be talked into taking a large interest in the proposed venture, there was nothing more to do; and as no stranger ever thinks of remaining longer in Cottonopolis than he can help, Hicks returned by the first available train, and reached Lime Street Station about four o'clock.

From Lime Street to Lord Street is only a short walk, but as the day was muggy and the streets were muddy, and Hicks objected to dirtying his boots, and expense being 'no object' with him, he took a cab.

Now, both by nature and habit Mr. Hicks was keenly observant. He seldom missed anything; and as the streets were crowded that afternoon, and the cab had to thread its way slowly through the throng of vehicles, he had ample opportunity for looking about him. And well it was he did look about him, for when the cab

was within two or three hundred yards of the office, he saw a sight which struck to his soul. It was not much to look at—only three men at the street door. But one of them was in uniform, and when his companion—one of whom looked uncommonly like Frost, the detective—went inside, he remained outside, as it might seem, on guard.

This was enough for Hicks. Lowering the front-window of the cab, he told the driver to go to the end of the street, and stop at a confectioner's shop at the right-hand corner, then pulled his hat over his eyes, and made himself as nearly invisible as might be.

When the cab came to a stand, Hicks, after telling the man to wait, went into the confectioner's shop at the right-hand corner, took a seat, and ordered a cup of coffee, all the while keeping an eye on the office, which was obliquely opposite and well within view.

He was not kept long in suspense. In a few minutes three men came out where two had gone in. One was Frost—no mistake about that; the second doubtless another detective; the third Hart, with his hands before him, tightly clasped.

The constable hailed a cab, into which Hart immediately entered. To him followed the second detective; the constable mounted on the box. The vehicle was then driven off towards the central police-station, and Frost and a third individual in civilian attire, who had just then come up, and the office-boy, set their faces towards the Lime Street Railway-Station.

'Game's up, and poor old Hart lagged,' murmured Hicks. 'Gad, they nearly had me, too! The lad has told them I am coming back by the five o'clock express, and they are gone to meet me. But they are reckoning

without their host, d—n them! They haven't caught the Old Man yet, and he'll take deuced good care they don't. . . . A regular burst-up! How can it have come about? None of the bills are due for a month or more. . . . Langley! If he has blabbed—and a line to the Bank of England would be enough to fire the train—if he has blabbed, I'll have his heart's blood, though I should swing for it the next minute. Lucky I bought those diamonds! With them and the money Dalton has got, we shall not come out so badly, after all; and now Hart is laid by the heels, there's only me and Dalton in it. Make a lot of difference, that, when it comes to a division. I hope to goodness they won't bag him. That would be too awful. I must write by this mail, and the steamer sails to-morrow—unless I go myself.'

The detectives and the office-boy being by this time out of sight, Hicks paid for the coffee—which he had not drunk—and returned to his cab.

'Tool me right away to Walton Lodge, Sefton Park,' said he to the driver, 'and if you do it in fifteen minutes, there's half a sov. for you.'

The man drove like Jehu, the son of Nimshi, and in two minutes under the time specified pulled up his horse at the garden gate of Walton Lodge.

'Here's your money,' said Hicks, as he alighted, 'and if you like to wait a spell, I'll do another journey with you.'

'I'll wait,' answered the fellow, with a grin, as he pocketed the half-sovereign. 'A gentleman like you is worth waiting for.'

Limbery, who let himself in with his latchkey, met his landlady in the hall.

'Any visitors, Mrs. Evans? Anybody been asking for me?' he asked, holding the door ajar.

'Nobody, sir. Was you expecting somebody?'

'I thought a friend of mine might have called, name of Frost. However, he will perhaps call later, or to-morrow. I am going to dine and spend the night with a friend at Birkenhead, Mrs. Evans; but, as I have agreed to meet him at the landing-stage at half-past five, I must take my bag with me and dress at his house.'

And with that Hicks walked leisurely upstairs; but once in his room he did not lose a minute. His first proceeding was to secure the remainder of his diamonds, which were neatly folded in a leather case, and a secret hoard of coin and bank-notes. Then he threw a dressing-case, several articles of clothing, a packet of papers, and some other things, into a small valise, and, taking it in his hand, descended quietly, and without the least appearance of hurry, into the hall.

'You have been quick,' said Mrs. Evans, who seemed to be on the look-out for him.

'I had to be. It will take me all my time to get to the landing-stage at half-past five, and I should be sorry to keep my friend waiting.'

'And that gentleman you mentioned—Mr. Frost; will you leave any message for him in case he should call?'

'Oh yes; you can tell him—tell him, with my compliments, that I almost expected to find him here, and was very sorry I could not wait. Another time I hope to be more fortunate. Be sure you tell him that.'

'Certainly, Mr. Hicks, if he calls. Shall you be back to-morrow?'

'Certainly, Mrs. Evans, at the usual time, and prepare

dinner for two. I shall probably bring Mr. Hart with me. Good-night, Mrs. Evans.'

'Good-night, Mr. Hicks.'

As the good lady stood at the open door, she heard her lodger bid the cabman take him to the landing-stage, but missed the muttered addition, 'Drive like the devil, and there's another half-sovereign for you.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

A BOOTLESS QUEST.

MRS. EVANS closed the front-door, and was returning to her own department, when she heard the jingling of another vehicle, and the tread of another horse, which grew louder until they suddenly ceased; then the opening of the garden gate, followed by footsteps coming up the gravel walk.

'Mr. Hicks back again! He has forgotten something, I suppose,' thought the landlady, and opened the door a second time.

Two men, one of whom had his hand on the bell-pull, were on the doorstep.

'Does Mr. Hicks live here?' asked the man who was going to ring.

'He does, sir.'

'Is he in?'

'He is not,' answered the landlady, regarding the visitors askance, for she liked neither their looks nor their manner.

'When was he here last?'

'Why do you want to know? If you will leave your cards——'

'Better tell her who we are, Frost,' interrupted the other man.

'Oh, you are Mr. Frost! Why didn't you say so at first? Pray step in,' said Mrs. Evans, unbending. 'He left a message for you.'

'Left a message for me?'

'Yes: I was to say that he had been expecting you, and was sorry he could not wait, having to dine with a gentleman at Birkenhead; but he hopes as you and him will meet another time.'

'That's gammon.'

'It's what he said, anyhow; and I'd have you know, sir, that I'm not used to having sich-like language addressed to me,' returned the landlady, now highly irate.

'I beg your pardon, madam. I did not mean that what you said was gammon. I meant that his hoping to meet me another time was gammon. When was this?'

'Only a few minutes since. He drove away, as he came, in a cab.'

'Are you sure he is gone? I should just like to have a look round his rooms—with your permission.'

'In Mr. Hicks' absence! Certainly not, sir. You doubt my word. How am I to know that your intentions are honest?' demanded Mrs. Evans, with indignant mien. 'Who are you that wants to search a gentleman's rooms, and him away?'

'We are detectives, and I have a warrant for the apprehension of Limbery Hicks on a charge of forgery and fraud; and if you will kindly show us his rooms——'

'Forgery and fraud!' cried the landlady, turning pale, and all of a tremble. 'And do you mean to say—and him such a nice gentleman, and paid so well, and was

so good to the servants, and I never had to wait an hour for my money, and let me order in whatever I liked, and never so much as added up my book—do you mean to say as he's a forger?'

'That's the charge against him, and I am afraid it's true. But his rooms, if you please; we have no time for talk.'

Mrs. Evans, a woman of weight, and now so agitated that she could scarcely stand, grasped the banister with her hand, and dragged herself laboriously up the stairs, the detectives following.

'There!' she gasped, pointing to a door, 'that's Mr. Hicks' sitting-room, and that other his bedroom. This is an awful business, gentlemen—the worst I have ever had.'

The two men were already in the sitting-room. As it was getting dark, Frost struck a match and lighted the gas.

'Nothing here,' he said, glancing rapidly round.

Then they turned into the bedroom. It looked as though it had just been shaken by an earthquake or ransacked by burglars—the carpet littered with garments, drawers open, one pulled entirely out, a box upside down and its contents on the floor, a chair overturned.

'Nothing here either,' muttered Frost, peeping under the bed. 'We are done again, Jim. The beggar is off, and no mistake! It was like his confounded impudence to say he expected me. However, he cannot be far. I think that old woman tells the truth.'

'I am sure she does. And she is too frightened to tell lies now, whatever she may have been at first. Let us be going.'

Mrs. Evans was still on the landing, leaning against the wall for support.

'How long do you say it is since Hicks left?' asked Frost.

'About ten minutes—maybe a little more.'

'And he said he was going to dine with a friend at Birkenhead?'

'Yes; and I heard him tell the cabman to drive to the landing-stage.'

'He may tell that to the marines. What sort of a cab was it—a four-wheeler?'

'Yes; a four-wheeler.'

'Did you notice the horse?'

'Yes, it was gray; and the driver wore a white hat and a light Chesterfield topcoat.'

'Thank you, Mrs. Evans. I think that will do. Did Hicks tell you anything else?'

'Yes. He said he should very likely bring Mr. Hart to dine with him to-morrow night, and that I must get whatever I thought necessary.'

Frost burst out laughing.

'Gammon again! This beats cock-fighting!' he exclaimed. 'Why, we have got Hart, and if they dine together to-morrow night, it will be in Kirkdale gaol. Come on, Jim. Good-night, Mrs. Evans.'

And with that the detectives ran downstairs and let themselves out.

'Where now?' asked Jim, as they were stepping into their hansom.

'Lime Street Station,' ordered Frost.

'We know that Hicks took a cab at Lime Street,' he continued, when they were under way—'no doubt the same as brought him here—and some of the fellows

about the station will be able to tell us where to look for the driver who wears a white hat and a light Chesterfield coat, and drives a gray horse; and he is the chap we want.'

'Why not go right away to the landing-stage?'

'Because we know better—anyhow, I do. Don't you see that he gave that order to the jarvey just to put us on the wrong scent, knowing it would be repeated by the landlady? The landing-stage is just the place as he hasn't gone to—Edge Hill Station is a good deal more likely to be his point, I should say. I didn't think you were so green, Jim.'

'Not quite as green as I look, happen. It's you as isn't up to snuff this time. Now, in my humble opinion, a chap as can diddle the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street to the tune of thousands of pounds, hold his own with bank managers and merchants and such like, and make 'em believe he is on the square when all the time he is on the cross, isn't a chap to be judged by ordinary rules. Now, isn't it on the cards that he meant to mislead us by telling the truth, knowing as we shouldn't believe it?'

'There's something in that, Jim,' returned Frost, after a minute's thought. 'Well, we will go to the landing-stage first on the off-chance. As you say, Hicks is no common thief, and it will take us all our time to nab him. What caps me is how he got to know he was wanted. Who gave him the straight tip, I wonder?'

'Who could? And he in Manchester? The Bank of England only discovered the fraud this morning, and we were on the ground in less than half an hour after getting the telegraphic message from Scotland Yard. I

expect it was the constable we left at the street entrance as did the mischief. To a downy cove like Hicks that bobby would be a regular danger-signal.'

'Yes, we made a mistake there,' said Frost ruefully. 'But I thought we should find 'em both at home; and the constable wasn't at the door more than five or ten minutes. A mistake, certainly; but cruel ill-luck all the same. Better luck next time, perhaps; and he cannot be far off, that's one comfort.'

The cabman received another order, and as the horse was swift and he did not spare him, and he knew all the short cuts, the two detectives were not long in reaching their first objective point. They alighted near the floating-bridge which connects the landing-stage with the land, and began to explore the neighbourhood.

Presently Jim uttered an exclamation—a kind of subdued view hallo.

'A gray, by Jingo!' he cried. 'A gray tit, in a four-wheeled cab!'

'And a chap in a white hat,' added Frost softly. 'We are getting warm, old lad. Th' quarry cannot be far off. We'll run him in to-night, see if we don't.'

'Who's green now, I should like to know?' murmured Jim reproachfully.

But Frost was too intent on circumventing the enemy either to answer or to heed.

They advanced towards the cab as though they were stalking it—Jim from one side, Frost from the other. It was just on the cards that Hicks might be inside, and this time, at least, they were determined not to throw away a chance, however remote.

The senior detective was the first to accost the cabman. 'Are you engaged?' he asked.

'No, and I don't want to be.'

'Why?'

'Why? Just look at my old 'oss.'

The animal in question certainly did not appear to advantage. His body was steaming with perspiration, and his heaving flanks, quivering nostrils, outstretched legs, and lowered head, showed that he had been driven to a standstill.

'He's done to a turn, and I'm done brown—diddled out o' ten bob,' added the man wrathfully.

'Dear, dear! How was that?' inquired Frost sympathetically. 'And the gentleman who diddled you, where is he gone?'

'I wish I knew—I do that. I would give him what for—I would that.'

'But how was it?'

'Find it out. . . . I shall have to take him out, I do believe, and fot (fetch) another tit. He's fair done up.'

'You have just come from Sefton Park?'

'How the devil——'

'You had better tell us all you know,' added Frost, changing his tone. 'We are detectives, and your late fare is wanted—very much wanted—and if you can put us on his track it will be worth your while; I may say, well worth your while.'

'Wanted? Whew! I thought as much by the way as he went on. Well, I'll tell you all I know. He hired me at Lime Street Station, and told me to take him to Bank Chambers, Lord Street. But when he was nearly there he said, "Go on to the top left-hand corner, opposite the church, and stop at a confectioner's shop as there is there." Which I did. Then he got out, told me to wait, and went into th' shop and got a

cup of coffee, or summat. He stopped there a matter of ten minutes, and when he came out told me to drive him to Walton Lodge, Sefton Park, saying as if I did it in fifteen minutes he would give me half a sov. I did it in thirteen, and got the money. He said as, if I would like to wait, there would happen to be another job for me. I liked; and in about a quarter of an hour he came out of th' house with a black bag in his hand, a black coat on his back, and a black hat on his head, told me to take him to the landing-stage, and said as if I drove like the devil he would give me another half-sovereign. Well, I did my best, but Tommy had been knocking about all day, and as I had sprung him up th' hill as fast as he could leg it, he was nearly at th' far end. However, I shoved him on, poor beggar, and got here in about twenty minutes—which isn't bad, considering. Well, I got down and opened the door.

"Here you are, sir," says I.

'But there he wasn't; and I was bilked—done out o' ten bob, and Tommy like to drop.'

'Were you going all the time?' asked Frost sharply.

'Yes; except that I was stopped half a minute or so by a big timber-lorry in Park Lane, and it was slow going in the Goree, owing to cotton-carts.'

'And at one of these places, you may depend upon it, he slipped out.'

'And though he didn't pay his fare, he left you a deposit,' added Jim, who had been exploring the cab.

'This tile isn't yours, I suppose? I found it under the seat.'

'It's new,' returned the cabby, examining it by the light of his lamp. 'And not a bad one, either—worth two crowns of anybody's money, auction price.'

'All right, keep it. Your name and number?'

'Jerry Pickles. Seven hundred and sixty-three. Stan' summat?'

'Here's a shilling for you. If you come across your late fare—name Hicks—give him in charge. You will be well rewarded. Good-night, Jerry.'

'Where next?' inquired Jim, as they moved away.

'To the office, to report. We can do no more to-night. It was as you thought. He took it for granted that we should not follow him down here, and has only saved himself by the skin of his teeth. He slipped out of the cab either in Park Lane or the Goree, after changing his coat and hat, and otherwise altering his appearance, and may be on the other side of the river by this time—unless he is harbouring in some water-side pub or lodging-house, and means trying to get away by to-morrow's New York packet. But we can stop that game.'

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CHAPTER XXV.

HIS NAME WAS WALKER.

ON the following morning Hart was examined at the police-court on a charge of having forged certain bills of exchange with intent to defraud, and conspiring with others to defraud, the governor and company of the Bank of England, and the chairman and directors of the Maritime Bank of Liverpool.

As the case was important and sensational, and the story of Hart's arrest and Hicks' escape—with exaggerations—had been noised about, the court-room was crowded with the curious, among whom were Romaine and his friend Trotter. Near them, but more in the background, was a red-haired, big-whiskered, countrified-looking man, whose most obvious garment was a long-tailed frieze overcoat. In one hand he carried a thick stick, in the other a battered beaver, and he watched the proceedings with great apparent interest through a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles.

The counsel for the prosecution began by observing that as he had only been instructed a few hours previously, he proposed to state the case very briefly, and should merely offer sufficient evidence to justify a remand.

Nevertheless, he made a long speech, which, however, save as touching his account of the detection of the fraud, need not be repeated here.

This was the way of it. In the ordinary course of business the bills discounted at the branches of the Bank of England were regularly transmitted to headquarters for examination and collection, and among those sent up from Liverpool were, of course, the artistic counterfeits of which Mr. Hart was so justly proud.

Now it happened that the then chief of the banker's bill office was a gentleman with an almost morbid passion for accuracy. No slip was too slight to escape his attention—above all, a slip in an acceptance.

'A bill is a serious document,' he was in the habit of saying, 'and ought to be absolutely flawless. A flaw in a bill is a reflection both on the maker and the acceptor, and if we pass a faulty bill it is a reflection on us.'

Well, one day Mr. Crampton, the gentleman in question, came across a bill purporting to be drawn by Limbery Hicks, Hart and Co., and accepted by Baring Brothers, which fell short of this high standard, albeit the blemish was so trifling that only an expert would have observed it, much less made a point of having it rectified. The instrument in question was drawn at six months from December 20, and marked by the forger as being due on June 23, and, therefore, on the face of it, quite in order; but on glancing at an almanack, Mr. Crampton perceived that June 23 fell on a Sunday. The correct due date was therefore June 22. A very pardonable mistake, which, had the bill been genuine, would in no way have interfered with its prompt payment.

But for Mr. Crampton a mistake had no reason to be, and he instructed one of his young men to take the offending document to Baring Brothers' counting-house on the following morning, and get the '3' in 'June 23' altered to '2,' and initialed by the firm.

The young man did as he was bidden, but the result was not as he had anticipated. When he told his tale and exhibited the bill to Baring Brothers' bill-clerk, that gentleman seemed rather surprised.

'Limbery Hicks, Hart and Co.! Have they a credit on us?' quoth he. 'I very much doubt—— However, I'll just refer you to our bill-book, if you'll allow me.'

Which he did, and found that no such bill was entered, and on referring to the ledger found that the house had no correspondents of the name of Limbery Hicks, Hart and Co. Then he showed the bill to one of the chiefs, who pronounced it to be a remarkably well-executed forgery. Thereupon the bill-clerk handed back the 'bit of paper' to Mr. Crampton's young man.

'It's bogus,' said he; 'and if you have got any more from the same drawers, they are all bogus.'

When Mr. Crampton heard this, he was delighted. His passion for accuracy was justified by its fruits. It had been the means of detecting a great fraud, and preventing the bank from being still further victimised.

'Let it be a lesson,' he said solemnly to his young men. 'You can never be too particular. Exactitude is a duty, and laxity in figures only one degree less reprehensible than laxity in morals.'

On learning what had come to pass, the managers took prompt action. The matter was straightway placed in the hands of the bank's solicitor, and telegrams were despatched to Liverpool, which led to the

arrest of Mr. Hart and the flight of Mr. Hicks, and an officer of the bank, accompanied by a gentleman from Baring Brothers' office, travelled thither by the evening mail to exhibit the bills and prove the fraud.

The only passage in the statement which appeared to affect the prisoner was the disclosure of the trivial, albeit fatal, error which he had committed. His long, sallow face and deep-set eyes seemed incapable of expression ; but as the advocate proceeded with his speech, Hart's eyes lowered, something like a blush suffused his swarthy visage, and the goatee that adorned it quivered with emotion. He could forge without compunction, stand in the dock unabashed, and probably hear his doom without flinching ; but the thought that he had blundered touched him in his tenderest point—professional pride—and he looked, and doubtless felt, really ashamed of himself.

The remand asked for was of course granted, and as the prisoner was removed from the dock people streamed from the court-room, talking excitedly and hustling each other after the manner of crowds, as though getting out quickly were a matter of life and death to them.

Close behind Romaine and Trotter came the red-haired countryman, so close that he overheard bits of their conversation.

'He'll get ten years, that chap,' said the lawyer to the clerk.

'At least ; and serve him right.'

'Do you think they'll catch that other rascal, Hicks?'

'I hope so, most devoutly, though I greatly fear they won't. He is as slippery as an eel. I know more about him than I did yesterday—had a revelation.'

'A revelation! God bless me, a revelation! What do you mean, Romaine?'

'Well, a week or two ago I happened to see Hicks at the Maritime Bank—saw him and heard him. His face I did not recognise in the least, but I felt sure I had heard his voice before—where and when, however, I could not for the life of me tell until a few minutes since, when it came to me like a flash. The voice was the voice of David D. Dundas—the ruffian who stuck us with those bogus bonds four or five years ago—and I have not the least doubt that Limbery Hicks and David D. Dundas are one and the same.'

'Well, 'pon my word, I——'

They were now outside, and the red-haired man overheard no more; but he had heard enough to give him an idea.

'That's a wrinkle,' he said to himself. 'The little chap is smarter than I gave him credit for. I must cultivate a feigned voice. It was not Junius, after all. Well for him! And now, quick march!'

Then, with bent head and slouching gait, he wended towards the water-side, and turning into a third-rate tavern, chiefly frequented by cattle-drovers and horse-copers, ordered a glass of whisky and called for his bill. When he had drunk the one and paid the other, he asked for his bag (a shabby-looking carpet thing), which had been left in the bar, and, walking quietly down to the landing-stage, crossed over to Birkenhead, whence he travelled, straight as a die, viâ Holyhead and Kingstown, to Cork, arrived there in time to take passage in the outward-bound Cunard Liner, and got safely away. His first proceeding on reaching New York was to despatch a telegram to Baltimore, thus conceived:

'Jerry has had an accident. The Old Man's name is Walker.'

Very little had been said at the examination about Hicks, only that the police were on his track, and hoped shortly to lay him by the heels, and that as yet all they knew of him was that he had been introduced to the local agent of the Bank of England by the manager of the Maritime Bank, and to him by Captain Langley, of Birdwood—a relative by marriage of a highly respectable and well-known Liverpool family.

The newspapers were less reticent. They gave the name of the well-known family, and Mr. Dumford, who was called over the coals by his directors, and had to pass a bad quarter of an hour with the agent of the Bank of England, tried to exculpate himself by blaming Langley, who, as he was led to believe, had known Hicks in America, and could vouch for his respectability.

All of which was a sore trouble to Mr. Berners. It annoyed him past bearing; and when Romaine suggested, or, rather, affirmed, that 'David D. Dundas' and 'Limbery Hicks' were two names for the same individual, the chief quite lost his temper.

'As if anybody could identify a voice after four years, and yet fail to identify the speaker!' he exclaimed. 'It is hallucination—pure hallucination; and it is impossible—quite out of the question—that anybody connected with my family can have been the associate of swindlers, either in America or elsewhere. If Captain Langley deceived Dumford, it was because he was himself deceived. I hope you have not mentioned this absurd idea to anybody else, Mr. Romaine?'

'Only to Trotter—the solicitor, you know—and a particular friend of mine; and he is discretion itself

—never turns anything over. Besides, he thinks I am wrong.'

'Of course you are. All the same, I shall write at once to Captain Langley for an explanation, which I am sure will put a very different complexion on the matter.'

So the letter, of which the reader knows, was written, more, however, in the hope than the belief (notwithstanding the snub which the writer had given Romaine) that the reply would not merely be satisfactory to himself personally, but such as he should be justified in communicating to those whom it might concern.

The reply was satisfactory—immensely so, thought Mr. Berners. It was certainly ingenious, and exactly answered the purpose for which it was written.

Hicks had come to him, said Langley, with a letter of introduction from Mr. James T. Meach, whose acquaintance he had made in America, and whom he had met afterwards both in Liverpool and New York. He believed that Mr. Meach was a highly respectable merchant of St. Louis; but as he came to London with a large credit on Berners Brothers, and frequented their news-room, he was probably better known to the house than to the writer. The letter brought by Hicks was an ordinary introduction. Langley gave him a friendly reception, which he would have given to any other stranger in like circumstances, and when Hicks expressed a wish to open an account with a Liverpool bank, he had no hesitation in taking him to the Maritime. On the other hand, he was careful to explain to Mr. Dumford how he came to know Hicks, even showing him Mr. Meach's letter (which he enclosed for his brother-in-law's perusal), and he neither said anything

nor was asked anything as to Hicks' commercial standing and personal character. If he had been asked, he should have advised Mr. Dumford to make his own inquiries.

Langley observed, in conclusion, that he wrote under difficulties. Owing to the temporary disablement of his right arm, he could do no more than sign his name, and was compelled to employ an amanuensis; and Irene, who was suffering from scarlet fever, required his continual attention.

'There, what do you think of that?' asked Mr. Berners, as he handed the letters to Romaine. 'I told you it would put another complexion on the matter. I remember Meach very well. We know he is respectable—anyhow, he was then. I suppose that rascal took him in. I am rather afraid some of our American friends are just a little too lax in giving letters of introduction. I don't think Captain Langley is to blame. Dumford ought certainly to have made his own inquiries; and he had no right to introduce a man to the Bank of England of whom he knew so little—one might say, nothing. But the fact is that Hicks got on the blind side of him, and now there is the devil to pay. Dumford wants a scapegoat—like everybody else who gets into a scrape. . . . Send copies of Langley's letter, with my compliments, to him, and also to the agent of the Bank of England and the chairman of the Maritime Bank. . . . This is bad news about Irene, but it cannot be a serious case, else her father would have said so. I must write to him.'

Mr. Berners' instructions were promptly carried out, and the result was so far satisfactory that the insinuations against Langley ceased, and Mr. Dumford

had to take the entire responsibility of his overconfidence.

Nevertheless, Romaine had a shrewd suspicion that Langley knew more than he chose to admit, and remained unshaken in his belief that Hicks was none other than his old friend David D. Dundas.

Frost, with whom he had one day a confidential talk on the subject, was of the same opinion.

'I saw Hicks and Langley together at the Crooked Billet, and they seemed as thick as thieves,' said the detective. 'And if you'll notice, Langley does not say that he had never met Hicks before, only that he came to him with a letter of introduction. I don't say as he had any hand in the swindle, but I do think he could tell us something about it if he would. . . . Yes, I dare say Hicks and Dundas are very nearly akin. A voice is often more easily remembered than a face. . . . Also, if you'll think of it, both are apt at disguises. We know Dundas was not as old as he looked by a long way. You remember that wig? And if Hicks hadn't disguised himself, and cleverly, too, he wouldn't have slipped through our fingers as he did. There's no denying it—he has been too many for us. Common swindlers, long-firm fellows, and such like, we know how to deal with, and generally where to find 'em; but sharpers of ability and education, who work with capital and hail from the other side, are tough customers. Anyhow, we have lagged Hart and broken up the gang, and that's something.'

These things Romaine added to his narrative. He also set down that Hart—who was sentenced to a long term of penal servitude—made no disclosures, nor could anything positive be ascertained as to his ante-

cedents. Nevertheless, from the inquiries which he made, or, rather, the answers to them, Frost came to the conclusion that the convict, in his early days, and under another name, had served as a clerk in the Bank of England, and being dismissed for dishonesty, had sought, and found, another sphere of activity, though not of usefulness, in the Great Republic.

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CHAPTER XXVI.

A MIND DISEASED.

IT was Skipworth whom Langley had employed as amateur private secretary—rather against the grain. But he had hardly any choice; his arm was inflamed, his hand swollen and almost useless. An entire stranger would have been still more objectionable. Mrs. Parrox could neither write legibly nor spell correctly, and, moreover, would have worried him with questions which he might have found it impossible to answer and difficult to evade.

Skipworth justified the confidence reposed in him, and being a gentleman, though in some respects rather a sorry one, wrote the letter as a matter of course, neither asking questions nor displaying curiosity, and when Langley expressed annoyance at being mixed up in so unpleasant a business, showed the fellow-feeling which is said to make men wondrous kind.

‘It is annoying,’ he answered sympathetically—‘doosedly annoying. People cannot be too particular about giving letters of introduction. I once got into a mess that way myself.’

‘How so?’

‘It was a fellow I met at the Baths of Lucca, and

a doosed nice fellow he seemed. Been in the commissariat, and belonged to a good family. We got on famously, and when he said he was going on a visit to a country-house near Canterbury, I gave him an introduction to my cousin Fred, who was stationed there with his regiment, the Old Die Hards. Fred was very civil to him, of course—dined him at the mess, and even lent him money. He borrowed money from everybody—in fact, played deep, and was suspected of cheating at cards—and ended by eloping with the Colonel's youngest daughter. And then it came out that he was a married man—left his wife in India, or somewhere—and had been a bad egg all his life. Fred was furious, naturally, and gave me a doose of a wiggling. When I said I did not know, he said I ought to have known, which I thought rather hard. No, you cannot be too particular about introducing people—above all to your own people. A shocking bad egg, Hicks. Clever, though. Must have been, or he could not have done the Bank of England. But you Americans are clever—there's no denying that. Smart, don't you call it ?

'Do you consider that a compliment ?' asked Langley, with an amused smile.

'Well, 'pon my word ! I didn't mean—I wasn't——' returned Skipworth, eagerly and incoherently. 'Not in a bad sense, you know—quite the contrary. And Hicks is no more a fair sample of Americans than Wilton, that rascal I introduced to Fred, is a fair specimen of Englishmen. They sailed under false colours, and I don't think a fellow can do anything much worse than that. His whole life is a lie.'

'Yes, his life is a lie,' repeated Langley indifferently. His thoughts were wandering somewhat, and the

phrase did not particularly strike him—then; but it sank into his memory, and was there preserved for future use.

Skipworth came up to Mon Repos nearly every day, and when he failed to call, his host felt hippled and disconsolate. Though still suffering, Irene was no worse; but Langley's wounded arm gave him a good deal of pain. His thoughts were often gloomy, and, except Skipworth, he had no company. Moreover, the physical inaction which he was compelled to observe—partly by the doctor's orders, partly by his reluctance to leave Irene for more than an hour at a time—fretted him. If he went out for a while, the child was sure to waken up and ask for her father, and as the trained nurse he had got from Lausanne spoke no English, it was necessary for either Mrs. Parrox or himself to be always within call. He would sit by the little patient's bedside for hours, holding her hand, soothing her with loving words, and, even when she was getting better, often kissing her, though he well knew how contagious was scarlet fever, and Dr. Morillon had warned him that the danger was greatest during the period of convalescence. But Langley, who had a splendid constitution, and had never been ill, and did not think he ever should be, smiled incredulously and despised precautions.

So it came to pass that Skipworth was always a welcome guest at the chalet, and though at the beginning of their acquaintance Langley had regarded him as a mere gambler, and 'a poor one at that,' with few ideas and no backbone, he was not long in finding out that the little Englishman had good qualities. He was cheerful and chatty, and his solicitude about Langley's

wound, and the interest he took in Irene, showed that he had a kind heart. Moreover, his talk, though seldom original and often trivial, was always cleanly. He had a great respect for women—when he spoke of his mother his voice would tremble and the tears spring to his eyes—and a higher code of honour than Langley's own—if Langley at that time could be said to have a code of honour.

'A gentleman cannot tell a lie, you know,' Skipworth once observed apropos to something they had been discussing.

It seemed to be a matter of course to him—just as though he had said a man of courage cannot do a cowardly deed—and made Langley, as he put it to himself, 'feel bad.'

'This poor little gambler is a better man than I am,' he said to himself more than once, which, though a humiliating admission, was a wholesome sign.

The crisis of her illness once past, Irene recovered rapidly. Dr. Morillon came less frequently, and one day he said the child might be taken out for an airing, and he should not need to call again—except as a friend.

But man proposes and God disposes. Even as the words were spoken, Langley, who, contrary to his usual habit, had risen late, entered the room with laggard step and heavy eyes.

'Good-morning!' said the doctor. 'I was just observing—— You don't look well'—eyeing him keenly.

'I don't feel well; didn't yesterday. Never felt like it before. Think I must have caught cold,' answered Langley, with a shiver.

'Headache?'

'Yes, for the first time in my life.'

'Sore throat?'

'Yes, also for the first time.'

'Your hand, please. Now open your mouth. Ah! hot dry skin, quick pulse, furred tongue, flushed face, swollen throat. You must return to your bed, my dear sir. You have got the fever, and I am not surprised.'

'Impossible! You are mistaken, doctor. It is only a cold. I shall be all right to-morrow. Go to bed indeed!'

'If you don't—— There! you are shivering again. A word in your ear'—drawing him aside. 'If you had no responsibilities, I should let you take your own course. Your life does not belong to me; but that little motherless child—if you were to die, what would become of her?'

This was an argument which Langley could not resist.

'Very well,' he said reluctantly. 'How long do you think?'

'I am a healer, not a prophet, my dear sir. But I can promise you one thing—the more exactly you conform to my orders, the more quickly are you likely to get better.'

When Skipworth called later in the day, he found his friend in bed.

'This is a bad job, old fellow,' he said gravely.

'Well, it is not a thing to rejoice over,' returned the other, with a forced smile. 'But I shall soon be all right. It is very good of you to come, but you must not come again till I am through, or I shall be giving you the fever.'

'I never catch things,' said Skipworth simply, 'and I shall come every day and take a hand in nursing you.'

'You must do nothing of the sort. I also felt sure I shouldn't catch it, and here I am.'

'I tell you I never catch things. You are under orders now; I am not, and I shall do as I say.'

And he did, and proved a very efficient nurse, likewise a great help to Mrs. Parrox, who, what with 'th' little lass being ill, and then th' maister, and having to do wi' folks as couldn't talk, and one thing and another, was, as she plaintively remarked, 'quite upset, and didn't know which way to turn.'

Langley's fever was of a comparatively mild type, and but for his own rashness he would have made a rapid recovery. As soon as he felt himself better, yet long before he was well, and without consulting Dr. Morillon, he got up, dressed himself, and went downstairs. The result was a serious relapse, which nearly cost him his life, and entailed a long and tedious convalescence.

There is nothing like the physical prostration which follows severe illness for softening a man's heart and clearing his mental vision, unless he be too shallow to think or too hardened to care, and Langley came under neither of these categories. During the weary hours of his slow recovery he thought much and deeply, and his thoughts were not pleasant. The conscience which he had so long suppressed, and almost succeeded in destroying, rose up in judgment against him; and though he could plead extenuating circumstances, he was constrained to acknowledge the justice of the condemnation.

Often he compared himself with Skipworth, to his own disadvantage. Both had wasted their lives, and Skipworth, in addition, had wasted his substance, lost his position, and alienated his friends. He had been a

fool, in fact. But Langley had been a fool, and more—something unspeakably worse; and as his capacities were greater than his friend's, so was his offence greater. Moreover, Skipworth abhorred a lie, and had never sailed under false colours; and only a little while before, even when his eyes were beginning to be opened, Langley, by introducing Hicks to the Maritime Bank, instead of handing him over to the police, had enabled that arch-scoundrel to perpetrate a great fraud, and, still later, had written a misleading if not a lying letter to Richard Berners.

This was one of the bitterest of many bitter thoughts.

Meanwhile, Dr. Morillon, who at the outset of their acquaintance had formed a not very favourable opinion of his patient, was beginning to take more than a professional interest in him. From questions which he occasionally put, the doctor inferred that Langley had received a medical education, and he was himself so devotedly attached to his calling that he could not imagine anybody who had once been a physician willingly becoming aught else. Moreover, Langley had obviously something on his mind which retarded his recovery; and, despite Macbeth's mocking query, Dr. Morillon believed in the possibility of ministering to a mind diseased. He knew that sympathy is often more efficacious than physic, and that confession, even though no absolution be given, may ease a burdened conscience.

For these reasons he invited, without soliciting, Langley's confidence, and Langley, won by Morillon's kindly manner and benign face, and craving for sympathy, and instinctively feeling that he should not be judged harshly, made the physician in some sort his lay con-

fessor, and in divers often-interrupted conversations unfolded the chief events of his life history—without, however, telling everything ; for it is not given to everybody, even to a saint who has been a sinner, much less to a sick, half-repentant ne'er-do-weel like Langley, to make an absolutely clean breast of his evil deeds.

But the following chapters, besides giving the gist of Langley's *apologia pro vita sua*, reveal many things which, though he considered it expedient to omit, or lacked the courage to disclose, are essential to the right understanding of our story.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

LANGLEY'S PAST.

As I have already hinted, Langley told his story little by little. He told it with many digressions, and even at the outset, while admitting that he had done some villainous things, tried to make out, and, as Dr. Morillon thought, not without success, that his sins were more the result of hereditary taint and unfavourable circumstances, than of innate perversity or deliberate wickedness.

When he told Mr. Berners that he was the son of an English gentleman, he spoke the truth. But he did not tell him that he was also the son of a Romany mother.

The elder Langley was a younger son of a good family, of more than average ability, and, though not rich, so attractive in appearance, and well connected socially, that he might have either 'married money' or embarked in any calling open to gentlemen with an assurance of success.

But in an evil moment he became enamoured of a gipsy girl whose sole attraction was her beauty. Her form was queenly, her face divine ; yet she could neither read nor write. Her tongue was sharp, her temper

violent, her language coarse, and she knew no more of the usages of polite society than an Ojibbeway squaw.

As one of Algernon Langley's friends said afterwards :

' Any man might be pardoned for falling in love with Norah Lee, but no gentleman could be excused for marrying her.'

Nevertheless, Algernon, infatuated by the girl's grand figure and Cleopatra-like charms, did marry her, thereby ruining his professional prospects and putting an impassable gulf between himself and his order ; for neither his own relatives nor the most easy-going of his friends could associate with a woman, one of whose brothers was a prize-fighter, another a horse-coper, and whose mother made her living by selling clothes-pegs and telling fortunes.

So, as much to cut himself off from his wife's gipsy kin as because his own kin had cut him, Algernon Langley converted his modest heritage into cash, and went with his wife to a remote yet picturesque and fertile part of Georgia, where he bought a farm and a frame-house, and settled down to rural pursuits.

Langley had hoped to train and educate Norah up to his own level. He did succeed in teaching her to read and write, and she possessed a natural gift for music, which he induced her to cultivate ; but he could neither give her a taste for reading nor reconcile her to the conventionalities which had become a part of his life. Her gipsy propensities were ineradicable ; the dull routine of domestic duties fretted her spirit and soured her temper. She spent most of her time out of doors, and now and then would flee into the woods and sleep for a night or two *à la belle étoile*.

To her husband's great distress ; but being a just man,

and knowing that he had sought her, not she him, he bore with her patiently, and accepted the consequences of his mistake with philosophic resignation.

Of this ill-assorted marriage was born Rufus Junius, a gentleman on one side, a vagabond and a depredator on the other.

The immediate result on Mrs. Langley was satisfactory. She became less erratic and more domesticated, proved herself a devoted mother, and was passionately proud and fond of her beautiful boy.

For a while all went well, or, at any rate, better ; but as Junius waxed in years and became old enough to learn, differences arose. The father tried to bring him up as a gentleman, in the best sense of that much-abused word, in such sort that he should be high-principled, sensitive on the point of honour, truthful, manly, and courageous. His mother's idea was to let him grow up as he liked, and deny him nothing, save when she lost her temper and chided him—often harshly. She taught him Romany, and told him gipsy stories, and her influence was not for good ; and, as the lesser evil of the two, the father very reluctantly sent his son to a boarding-school while he was yet a mere child. This set both the boy and his mother against the father ; and as Rufus had long holidays, and Mrs. Langley went often to see him, and he ran away from school at least once a quarter, the remedy proved to be of doubtful efficacy, besides causing a chronic feud between husband and wife.

Nevertheless, Mr. Langley persevered, taking every opportunity to imbue his son with the principles by which he himself set so much store, and though the positive results he obtained were not very encouraging, and the lad's inherited vagabond propensities were only

too much in evidence, his father cherished the hope that, as he grew older and circumstances more propitious, his better nature would assert itself more and more, and finally triumph over his baser instincts. For albeit his moral sense was as yet very rudimentary, Rufus possessed some good qualities. He was bright, intelligent, fearless, capable of strong attachments, good-natured, and generous. But in certain eventualities these last-named qualities might prove a snare to his feet. The good-natured and generous are acutely responsive to their environment and easily led, above all when they are young, and if the leading is bad, the outcome cannot be good.

When Rufus was old enough to choose a profession, he thought he should like to be a vet.; but as this idea did not please his father, he elected for the higher branch of the healing art, and went to a first-class medical school in a neighbouring State. Though a desultory student, he was an apt learner, and during his college days acquired a fair measure of medical lore. Nevertheless, surgery was his preference, and for a neophyte he became a deft operator.

But before he had finished his course a great misfortune befell. His father accidentally killed himself with his own gun, and Rufus was called home in hot haste. His mother was greatly shocked by the suddenness of the blow; yet though she observed a decent mourning, her grief was only on the surface, and she probably regarded her husband's death as rather a relief than a disaster. Her chief anxiety seemed to be that Rufus should stay at home and help her with the farm, and as he preferred freedom to restraint, he made no difficulty about complying with her wish. But the

farm did not prosper under their management. Their husbandry was thriftless, and, to make matters worse, several of Mrs. Langley's people came over, and those of them who did not stay in the house encamped in the neighbourhood. One of the new-comers was Sol Stanley, who completed the young fellow's gipsy education, and taught him, in addition, horse-copering and the 'noble art of self-defence.' His influence was not for good.

And then Mrs. Langley took it into her head to marry Issacher Lovell, a distant kinsman and one of her tribe, to her son's great indignation, for he held his father's name in honour, and roundly told his mother that she was disgracing both him and herself. Then there were hot words and violent scenes, and the end was the sale of the farm and the breaking up of the home. Rufus kept for himself only two hundred and fifty dollars. All that remained after the payment of their debts he gave to his mother, and on the day she started for the old country with her husband he set out in search of fortune and adventure.

During the next four years of his life young Langley tried his hand at all the occupations he had mentioned at Sol Stanley's trial, and at several which he omitted to mention. One of the latter was soldiering. He enlisted in a United States cavalry regiment, saw some service on the frontier, and then, tiring of discipline and desiring a change, coolly deserted. Next he drifted into the wilder parts of the South and West, wandered for a while in Mexico, served in a company of Texan rifle rangers, and, after divers other experiences, joined a party of trappers and gold-seekers, who, when other resources failed, turned their attention to scalp-hunting.

At that time, and for many years thereafter, the States

of Sonora and Chihuahua paid a bounty for Apache scalps, and as the savages were continually raiding Mexican villages, slaughtering the men and carrying off the women into a captivity worse than death, they probably deserved to be scalped. Nevertheless, scalp-hunting is a brutal and demoralizing business, to say nothing of the risk. The hunters were sometimes hunted, and, when captured, put to death with every refinement of cruelty.

It was not long before Rufus became leader of the band to which he had attached himself—a distinction, however, which he owed less to his knowledge of Indian warfare than to his quality of medico. A man who could dress a gunshot wound, set a limb, and prescribe for ‘shakes’ was invaluable, and the boys (among whom was Sol Stanley) made him their captain, by way of making sure, or at least more sure, of his services.

Everyone had either a nickname, conferred by his companions, or a *nom de guerre* chosen by himself. Langley’s was ‘George,’ probably because he hailed from Georgia, and his men addressed him as captain, colonel, or doctor, as the humour took them. Moreover, his surgical skill gave him privileges more substantial than the somewhat barren honours of leadership. When the boys were in funds they would gamble recklessly, drink madly, and quarrel desperately. But even when bowies were drawn and bullets flying, Captain George was never touched. His life was too precious to be wasted. Nor at such times did they press him to drink; and, fortunately for both him and themselves, he had a constitutional aversion to fire-water. More than once they owed their lives to his vigilance and sobriety.

After a while the band received an important recruit

in the person of the individual known to the reader as 'David E. Dundas' and 'Limbery Hicks.' He called himself John Oldman. Nobody knew whence he came or what he had been. According to one account, he had held a commission in the United States army. According to another he had come a 'big burster' in a northern city, and was 'wanted' by the police of his native State for fraudulent bankruptcy, or worse—which was probably true.

But whatever he might have been or done, he had a strong will and great energy, and after a while became the ruling spirit of the band. Albeit the boys still acknowledged George as their leader, they began to speak of the new-comer, whom they called the Old Man, as the 'boss,' and, thanks to his astuteness, greater age, and wider knowledge of the world, he ended by dominating Langley almost as completely as he dominated the others. He had travelled in many lands, talked well, had a large store of anecdote, knew how to take people on their blind side, and Langley, delighted to have a congenial companion, and amused by his cynical humour, yielded insensibly to his influence, and was corrupted by his example.

The band increased. Oldman enlisted fresh recruits, for the most part cut-throats and outlaws of the worst frontier type. When Apache scalps were not obtainable, they would 'raise the hair' of *Indios civilizados* (tame Indians), sometimes of inoffensive Mexicans. They lifted cattle, stole horses, and more than once, under Oldman's auspices, disguised themselves as Apache braves and robbed the mails.

Langley protested, for, though not very scrupulous, he drew the line at murder and highway robbery; but

as, save when they were actually on the war-path, the boys owned no man master, his protests were unheeded, and as he did not carry his opposition to the length of resigning his now nominal leadership, he acquired an unenviable notoriety on both sides of the border.

But several of the desperadoes being caught red-handed and summarily hanged, the others found it expedient to turn their attention to less questionable pursuits. Wherefore a number of them, under Langley's command, went on an expedition against the Apaches, and as the latter were just then making an incursion into the northern part of Chihuahua, there seemed a likelihood both of securing scalps and recovering loot.

Hearing from their scouts that a party of braves of about their own strength had plundered several country houses, and, as usual, murdered the men and carried off the women, the boys started in pursuit, and eventually overtook them. The Apaches turned at bay, but after a fierce fight were defeated, and, except three or four who got away, killed and scalped.

The prizes of victory were a considerable amount of promiscuous plunder and some half-dozen rescued captives, one of whom was Doña Juanita Esmeralda, a young woman of great beauty and unmixed Spanish blood. Her husband had been killed by the Indians, and in default of rescue she would have had to mate with one of their chiefs. The poor lady, who had been in terrible distress, thanked her deliverers with effusive gratitude, expressed in choice Castilian and emphasized with graceful gestures. But though she knew it not, Doña Juanita was not much safer with her rescuers than she had been with her captors. Several of the scalp-hunters had fallen in love with her at sight ; soon

they began to quarrel about her, and some of the more ardent and less scrupulous actually proposed to raffle for her.

Among the smitten was Langley, and though he might have protected her by his authority, he bethought him of a better way, or, at any rate, a way that pleased him better. He warned her of her danger, and suggested marriage.

'Once my wife,' he said, 'you will be as safe as though you were in the city of Mexico.'

This rather off-hand proposal did not startle Doña Juanita as much as might be supposed. El Capitan (as she called him) had treated her with great respect; she owed to him her deliverance from the Apaches. He was, moreover, good-looking, rode well, and bore himself bravely; while she, though a widow, was still in her teens; and the late Don Felipe Esmeralda, to whom she had been wedded only a few weeks, was a surly *viejo* (old fellow) for whom she did not care. Obviously she might do worse than marry this handsome Americano del Norte.

'But how about a priest?' she asked, with charming naïveté.

'We have a priest with us—Padre Morales—who will be very happy to perform the ceremony,' answered Langley. 'Shall I call him?'

He did not tell her—did not even know—that the padre was a 'silenced' priest who had 'done time' in the *carcel* of Chihuahua city.

'If you think,' she murmured timidly, lowering her eyes before his ardent gaze, 'if you think it is the only means of securing my safety, Señor Capitan—'

'I shall call him then?' said Langley, raising her hand to his lips.

‘Si, Señor Capitan.’

So the scalp-hunting priest was called and the knot tied—effectually, as they believed, albeit, if Langley had given the question serious thought, he might have had doubts. But marriage was lightly regarded among the wilder spirits on the frontier. Some of the boys had been married (mostly to squaws) and deserted by their spouses, or divorced from them, by mutual agreement or otherwise, half a dozen times. Not Langley, however. This was his first matrimonial venture. The late Señor Don Felipe was a *rico*; he had lands, flocks, and herds, a town-house and a country-house, and Juanita inherited his wealth. Moreover, she had fallen very much in love with El Capitan, of which when they were married she made no secret.

‘You will leave these ladrones and go home with me?’ she said, putting her arm in his and looking at him lovingly with her lustrous eyes.

‘With all my heart, Juanita mia. You surely did not think I should let you go alone?’ returned Langley passionately.

For some time he had been seeking for an excuse which might enable him to leave the ladrones without offending them. Now he had an excuse there was no gainsaying; having married a wife, he could not stay. By way of making a pleasant parting and celebrating the event, he turned over to the boys his share of the scalp bounty and plunder.

After the return of the expedition, Captain George accompanied Juanita to Chihuahua city, and the Old Man reigned in his stead.

With them, at his own particular request, went Sol Stanley, in the capacity of stud-groom and general factotum.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DOÑA JUANITA.

FOR a time all went well.

Juanita was immensely proud of her gallant captain, and he of his handsome bride. Also he thought himself wonderfully lucky in having married a woman with a fine fortune, who was so fond of him that she would hardly let him out of her sight. This, to be sure, had its drawbacks, yet it was a fault, if it could be called a fault, on the right side. Few are the men who do not like to be made much of by the woman they love.

But there came a time when things ceased to go well —began, indeed, to go badly, and finally went utterly to the bad.

The honeymoon was hardly over when Langley discovered that Doña Juanita had an imperious temper and a jealous disposition. She wanted to rule everybody, El Capitan included, and he could hardly so much as look at another woman without incurring his wife's displeasure, manifested sometimes in a fit of sulks, oftener in upbraidings and reproaches.

At the outset, Langley, who had an easy temper, answered with the soft words which are said to turn away wrath, and then, though not always, Juanita

would throw her arms round his neck and crave his forgiveness with tears, pleading as her excuse the greatness of her love. She loved him so much that she could not bear him to bestow even a smile on any other woman; but she would try to be less foolish, indeed she would, whereupon they would kiss and make friends.

Yet after a time this sort of thing grew tiresome. Juanita's caprices and jealousies would have tried the patience of Job, and Langley, albeit good-tempered, was no Job. To make matters worse, she enjoyed social dissipations, and was passionately fond of dancing. But when they went to a fandango it behoved El Capitan to mind his *p*'s and *q*'s, for if he danced with a *niña*, or any woman who was the least attractive, or to whom he was passably courteous, he had to pass a bad quarter of an hour the first time he and his wife were *en tête-à-tête*.

At length, being provoked beyond endurance, he rebelled deliberately, dancing twice on the same evening with a charming señorita, to whom he made a point of paying marked attention. When he looked round after the second dance, the Doña was nowhere to be seen. Guessing whither she was gone, and wondering how she had taken his revolt, Langley went home. As he entered her room she rose from the couch on which she had been reclining. And very well she looked in her white ball dress, her mantilla thrown back and falling in graceful folds from her shoulders, the dark hair gleaming with gems, her black eyes flashing fire, and her tall figure drawn up to its full height.

'You danced twice with Señorita Montijo!' she exclaimed, in a voice thick with passion.

'Si, Juanita,' answered El Capitan carelessly, as he rolled a cigarette—a bit of affectation that exasperated his spouse almost past bearing.

'You made love to her,' she said, in a voice tremulous with rage.

'No, Juanita'—lighting the cigarette.

'It is false; I saw you. She answered your words with smiles. You did make love to her.'

'Very well, have it so, then.'

'Promise never to dance with her again or speak to her. Promise, I say.'

'Certainly not. I shall dance with Señorita Montijo at the very next fandango we go to, and to-morrow I shall call at her house and pay my respects.'

'You shall not.'

'Who is going to stop me?'

'I am, unless you promise——'

'I promise myself the pleasure of calling on Señorita Montijo to-morrow, and I mean what I say.'

'And I say you shall not,' cried Juanita, throwing off her mantilla and raising her right hand, in which something bright glittered; and as El Capitan parried the stroke by dashing the arm aside, an ivory-hilted stiletto with a thin, murderous-looking blade fell on the floor.

Before she could attempt to pick it up, Langley had seized both her wrists.

'Not so fast, Juanita,' he said quietly. 'If you use a dagger in that way, you are more likely to commit suicide than murder. You should strike upward, not downward. . . . I thought you loved me?'

'I do—so much, that if you are untrue to me I shall kill you—you and her.'

'As though dancing with a girl were being untrue!

You are mad, Juanita. To-morrow you will be sorry for having been such a fool.'

And with that Langley left her and betook himself to another room, taking good care to bolt the door before he sought repose.

When he said that Juanita would be sorry, it was rather an expression of hope than of conviction; wherefore, when they met in the morning, he was not greatly surprised to find her unrepentant and defiant. When he spoke to her kindly, she answered curtly, or not at all; and this being very unpleasant, Langley again left her to herself.

Later in the day he called at the house of Señor Don Manuelo Montijo, and found that gentleman and the doña, his wife, and the señorita, his daughter, in a state of high indignation.

The young lady had just received a letter from Doña Juanita, threatening her with a terrible vengeance if she should ever dance with El Capitan again, or receive his visits.

Langley fully shared in his friends' indignation, and when he went home gave Juanita a 'piece of his mind,' telling her roundly that, besides being guilty of an unpardonable outrage, she had made both him and herself supremely ridiculous. But she would neither ask his pardon nor acknowledge her fault, and after a bitter quarrel he left her once more to herself, and, mounting his horse, rode off to their hacienda, some ten miles away.

The next day he had a call from the Old Man.

'I wanted to see you,' said he, 'and rode over on purpose to Chihuahua; and when I learnt you were not there, came on here. . . . What's the trouble?'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, there's no use trying to keep it dark. Everybody is talking about you and Doña Juanita, and the letter she wrote to Señorita Montijo.'

'The Montijos are talking about it, then?'

'Naturally. The *posadero* told me, and I could see, when I called at your house, that something was up, but I did not, of course, get at all the facts. I thought you would perhaps tell me.'

Langley told him.

'Well, she is a nice hot cup of tea, is Doña Juanita! Hadn't you better quit before it is too late?'

'I don't think she really meant to hurt me. I doubt whether she could, when it came to the point. I guess she will climb down in a day or two, and we shall be good friends again.'

'There is no accounting for jealousy, sonny, and if you knew the sex as well as I do! Jealousy is a sort of madness, and when the fit is on her, Doña Juanita is quite capable of doing you a mischief while you sleep, or putting something into your chocolate that might not agree with you. She would be very sorry afterwards, of course—they always are—frantically sorry; but that would not restore you to life. Better take my advice and quit. You are not really married, you know; and even though you were——'

'Not really married! What on earth do you mean?'

'Well, to begin with, Morales being a "silenced" priest—which means that he has forfeited for ever the right of performing any ecclesiastical function—I doubt whether your marriage with Doña Juanita is valid, even according to the rules of the Church, and I am sure it is not legal according to the law of the land. How

could it be? No banns, no civil contract, no registration, no anything.'

'Morales gave Juanita a paper, which we all signed.'

'That is nothing, sonny—nothing at all. You consult a lawyer, and see whether I am not right. And you would be quite justified on moral grounds—if you want moral grounds. When a woman tries to knife her husband, I guess it's about time for him to clear out.'

'Well, she has led me a devil of a life lately.'

'Another reason for quitting. Come with me. I am going to be off myself. That's what I came to tell you, and say good-bye.'

'How about the band?'

'The band is broken up—knocked into a cocked hat. Hadn't you heard?'

'Not a word. What is become of the boys?'

'Gone over to the great majority, most of 'em. We crossed the border after scalps. Didn't find any—getting uncommonly scarce, scalps are—but on our way back we picked up a few horses, and were followed by a sheriff's posse, and had a fight for it. But they were too many for us. Only Connor, Morales, and myself got away. All the others were either shot in the scrimmage or taken prisoners and strung up. However, it doesn't much matter. I haven't done so badly. Made a nice little pile, and now I am going North. Scalp-hunting isn't good enough. . . . You have money, I suppose?'

'Not much,' said Langley thoughtfully. 'This property is Juanita's, you know. I dare say I can put my hand on two or three thousand dollars, though.'

'That would do. I have rather more than that.'

Let us pool our capital and go to Philadelphia or New York. I know the ropes, and with six or eight thousand dollars we ought to make a fortune in no time. What do you say ?'

'All right ; let us go !' exclaimed Langley impulsively. 'I am not so sure about the fortune, but it will be a change, anyhow, and I am getting sick of Mexico.'

'Good ! We can start right away, then. Where is Sol ? He might be useful.'

'Gone. Juanita and he did not hit it, somehow ; and a few weeks since she bounced him—partly, I think, because he and I occasionally exchanged a few words in English, which she doesn't understand.'

'My God, what a woman ! I wouldn't live with her for a million dollars a year. Where has Sol betaken himself to ?'

'I believe his destination was New York, with a view to horse-copering, and probably a bit of card-sharping when opportunity offers. He left an address which he said would find him. Here it is'—handing Oldman a slip of paper. 'We start to-morrow, then ?'

'If you like.'

'Better, I think. If we delay, Juanita may enter a *caveat*, or make some nonsense, and where women are concerned I am just a little soft. If she came to me penitent and in tears, I wouldn't answer for the consequences. I wonder—— No, it would be of no use. There are only two ways—either abject submission or absolute separation, and I guess separation will be the best for both of us.'

All that day and all the next Doña Juanita was in hopes that her husband would return to her and offer the olive-branch of peace, perhaps cry *peccavi*, and

ask forgiveness for having provoked her jealousy. But on the third day it occurred to her that he might have taken another view of the matter, and, growing alarmed, she went to the hacienda, whither she knew he was gone. But instead of him she found a letter to the effect that, as her jealousy and violent temper, culminating in an attempt on his life, rendered it impossible for the writer to live with her any longer, he had departed for his own country, and did not intend to return.

This letter gave Juanita a very bad quarter of an hour. Like Sir Ralph the Rover, she tore her hair and cursed herself in her despair.

Then she called for her horse, and, escorted by half a dozen mounted peons, set out in pursuit of her runaway spouse.

But it was a bootless quest. El Capitan and his companion were already far on their way to New Orleans, and the doña was forced to return to Chihuahua furious and discomfited.

At New Orleans Langley and Oldman separated, the latter travelling to New York (where they were to meet later on) by sea, the former by St. Louis and the Lakes, for no particular reason except that he had not seen that part of the country before, and his Mentor said he should be unable to provide him with occupation for some little time. As yet he had not disclosed the nature of the operation which was to make their fortunes.

‘I have two or three schemes in steep, but nothing in shape,’ he observed. ‘A good deal depends on circumstances and opportunities. When you join me at New York in a month’s time, I shall have everything

cut and dried. Meanwhile, I am going to take another name.'

'Why, and what?'

'Why? Well, for one reason, because I have been in New York before. Also, I change my name, on principle, every year, and it is just that time since I first called myself John Oldman.'

'What did you call yourself before that?'

'Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies, sonny,' answered Proteus, with a strident laugh. 'However, I have no objection to tell you what I intend to call myself in the immediate future. I've taken my passage in the name of Harry Lelong.'

'Harry Lelong! Why, that was my name when I served in Uncle Sam's cavalry,' returned Langley, with a much-surprised look.

'It's a fact of which I am aware. I had it from Sol. You have done with it, I suppose?'

'Certainly.'

'Well, then, I shall use it. It's a nice handy little name, and suits me to a T. Let me know when you land. A line addressed to Mrs. Mantis Lee, Central Post Office, will find yours truly.'

'Who is Mrs. Mantis Lee?'

'A mythical personage whom I have invented to confound the enemy. Be up to time, or you may be too late for the fun. I say, if you are smart, you should make as much at euchre and poker while you are steaming up the muddy Mississippi as will pay your travelling exes.'

Which Langley did, and it was while he was steaming up the classic stream in question that the *Watersnake* blew up, and he saved James T. Meach from a watery grave,

CHAPTER XXIX.

PLAIN SPEAKING.

THE part of his career which, in his talks with Dr. Morillon, Langley passed over most lightly was the interval between his arrival in New York and his departure for Liverpool—probably because it was the part of which he felt the most ashamed. He had done bad things before, but never before had he played in turn the rôles of knave and fool, or fallen so completely under the domination of a villainous associate.

Langley imagined that his Protean colleague proposed to make their fortunes by operations on the Stock Exchange—a belief which Lelong was solicitous to encourage; for that astute adventurer never trusted anybody more than he could help, or, rather, he distrusted everybody. Besides Langley, his confederates were Hart and Dalton, and until the bogus bond fraud was discovered by its victims, only Hart knew how it had been effected.

By sheer audacity and false references, Proteus contrived to obtain a post in the office of the City and Suburban Railway Company, and was thereby enabled to purloin a number of blank forms, and stamp them with the company's own stamp, borrowed for the occasion, and restored before it was missed.

Hart forged the signatures.

So soon as the documents were in order, Lelong handed a few of them to Langley (who believed they were genuine), and requested him to offer them for sale to a banker whom he named.

The object was twofold—to compromise Langley in such a way that he would be unable to back out, and ascertain whether the forgeries were well enough executed to deceive experts.

If the experiment failed and Langley were lagged, the others would 'make tracks' and leave him in the lurch. If it succeeded, well and good—they could go on with confidence.

It did succeed. Langley sold the bonds and got the money.

'That's all right,' observed the boss, when his dupe reported progress and produced the cash; 'you have done very well. Here are some more of the same sort; they represent your share of our profits. Not a bad return, eh?—twenty-five thousand dollars for twenty-five hundred.'

For the first time Langley suspected the truth.

'How did you come by them, boss? Are they good?' he demanded.

'How did I come by them? Are they good?' repeated the other, with a cynical laugh. 'Didn't I tell you not to ask questions? Of course they are good. You sold two thousand dollars' worth to Vanderbyls, and they should know. No getting over that, Rufus. Anyhow, here they are; take 'em or leave 'em, as you like. But if you are wise, you will go back the way you came. Sell a few here and there—at Chicago, St. Louis, and New Orleans; and if you don't get rid of the lot inside

of a month, drop the balance into the Mississippi or burn 'em. Also, if you are cute, you will take an alias and wear gig-lamps. You hesitate! Don't be a fool, sonny! The bonds are good. Anyhow, you have sold a parcel of 'em and got the price. In for a penny, in for a pound. Take 'em, man. You needn't sell them unless you like.'

Langley took them.

'What are you going to do?' he inquired.

'A tour in Europe—Liverpool, London, Paris, and the Continent generally. I feel as though I need a change. When I come back we shall meet again, I hope.'

The Old Man kept for himself as many of the bonds as he thought he could sell in Europe—the lion's share, naturally; and after Hart had disposed of a quantity in America, he obtained a passport in the name of Silas Squier, and joined (in Paris) his confederate, who had with him a passport in which he was described by yet another alias.

Sol Stanley took no part in the swindle; but when he read an account of it in the papers, he identified 'Harry Lelong' with Langley; and when the Old Man, on his return from Europe, employed the gipsy to dispose of some English bank bills among the sporting fraternity with whom he associated, the conclusions which Sol drew were not very wide of the mark.

After a short struggle between Langley's better and his worse nature, the latter got the best of it. He succeeded in half persuading himself that it was no affair of his how the bonds had been come by. If such people as Vanderbys accepted them as genuine, so might he; and for the rest, twenty-five thousand dollars

were a great temptation to a man whose only other available assets were less than a hundred.

But the money did him little good financially, and infinite harm morally. He started a stud of trotting horses, ran them in matches and backed them to win, occasionally betted against them and arranged for them to lose. But as he spent lavishly and fell among men who were sharper than himself, and even more unscrupulous, he was not long in getting rid of his dollars.

In the meantime, Hicks—to give him the pseudonym by which he is best known to the reader—had reached a similar result by different, albeit analogous, methods. Like most great men, Hicks was not infallible. His besetting weakness was a belief that he could compete with men who spent their lives on the Stock Exchange, and make himself a millionaire by shrewd dealings in stocks and shares—rigs, corners, and what not—a game at which he found his masters and lost his money; and when he and Langley came together again, one was nearly, and the other quite, at the end of his tether.

But Hicks was not at the end of his resources. He had thought out a new scheme which, properly managed, was sure to make a 'pot of money'—forging Peruvian Government bonds. The fraud, if craftily executed, could not be detected until the coupons were presented for payment at Lima, and Lima being a long way off, the forgers would have ample time to turn round in—especially if the bonds could be negotiated in Europe.

The chief difficulty was getting a plate engraved. As there were reasons for not attempting to get this work done in America, Hicks proposed that Langley should make a trip to Europe and try to get half a dozen plates engraved either at Birmingham or Liège.

'Bring me the right plates, and I'll charge myself with the rest,' quoth he; 'and though I am nearly stone-broke, I can raise the wind for your exes, and you will have a good time.'

Langley, reckless and demoralized, and at his wits' end for money, consented.

Among Hicks' minor speculations had been purchasing the patent rights of the Perfect rifle, and Langley was to arrange for their sale in Europe if he could. But this was an altogether subsidiary business, from which they expected little or nothing. It had, however, the incidental advantage of serving as a mask for their actual object, and obtaining from Mr. Perfect the introduction to Gibbins and Murk, which led to Langley's acquaintance with Mr. Berners and the family at Birdwood.

As a matter of fact, Langley made no attempt to get the plates engraved. After doing something with the rifle at Birmingham, he went to Liège in order the more effectually to deceive Hicks as to his movements.

Yet let us give Langley his due. Even at that time he was not wholly devoid of conscience. On his first visit to London, between his arrival in England and his engagement to Miss Berners, he consulted a lawyer, who fully confirmed his doubts as to the legality of his marriage with Juanita. Else, as he assured Dr. Morillon, had he never proposed to Ida Berners.

These revelations greatly shocked the doctor. They were worse than he had anticipated, and, knowing the self-deceptions to which men are prone, he doubted whether Langley had told him the worst. Nevertheless, they increased his interest in Langley. He regarded him as a victim of heredity—a man in whom, more than

in most men, antagonistic ethical tendencies were contending for the mastery. Also his protégé had been unfortunate in his upbringing and the influences which, at the most impressionable period of life, had moulded his character.

As a man of probity and honour, Dr. Morillon visited Langley's misdeeds with the reprobation they deserved; yet, being a just man, he made due allowance for his hereditary taint and other disadvantages, and as a good physician ardently desired so to reinforce his patient's better nature that he might be enabled to lead a better life, and render some service to his kind.

On the other hand, Dr. Morillon was not sanguine about the result; for though Langley's better tendencies were for the moment in the ascendant, and he was full of virtuous resolutions, they were doubtless in great measure due to his illness and long confinement to his room. When he regained his health, and temptation once more beset him, he would probably succumb, as he had done only a few weeks previously at Saxon.

Nevertheless, the experiment was worth trying, and Dr. Morillon resolved to try it. How he fared in this endeavour will appear in the sequel.

The first thing was to leave Langley under no illusion as to the enormity of his conduct.

'You did very wrong to marry that English lady,' observed the doctor. 'Of all the bad things you have done, I think that was one of the worst. Suppose the lawyer you consulted is mistaken—how then?'

'He is not mistaken. I am sure he isn't!' exclaimed Langley eagerly. 'My marriage with Juanita is invalid for half a dozen reasons. In the first place—'

'I don't want to go into your reasons. I am not a

lawyer, thank goodness; and no lawyer is infallible. You cannot deny the possibility of the man being mistaken. But be that as it may, you should, at least, have disclosed the facts to Miss Berners and her friends.'

'In that case we might have been hindered from marrying, and I should have gone utterly to the bad—and I loved her.'

'And yet you deceived her! A nice sort of love that! Do you think she would have consented to marry you if she had known the truth?'

'I feel sure she would.'

'Why, then, did you not tell her the truth?'

'Why? Well, to be perfectly frank, I feared that if she knew about Juanita she would love me less, and be made very unhappy, and her friends would use their influence——'

'Oh, this is pure egotism. It seems to me that your sole consideration was yourself. This poor lady was left in ignorance of a vital fact, allowed to run a frightful risk, perhaps contract an illegal marriage, in order that you might retain her love, and be prevented from going to the bad. Why would you have gone to the bad? Je n'en vois pas la nécessité. And you did then, in effect, go to the bad. What could be worse, I should like to know, than basely deceiving a poor woman who trusted to your honour? And say now, if Miss Berners had been dowerless, would you have been so resolute to make her your wife?—would you even have seriously thought of wooing her? Examine your conscience before answering.'

Langley remained silent.

'Oh, you need not answer me. Answer to yourself—to the tribunal of your own conscience. I have no

pleasure in asking these questions. My sole object is to do you good ; and you know that a gangrenous spot can be eradicated only by the actual cautery. Shall I continue ? It is for you to say.'

'Oh, go on !' answered Langley bitterly. 'Go on, and don't spare me. . . . Forgive me, doctor. It is kind of you to take so much interest in a reprobate whom you must needs despise. I know you are doing me good, and I begin to see my conduct in a new light. But I have been very unfortunate. Admit, now, that I have been unfortunate, and that there are extenuating circumstances.'

'Freely. But remember that, according to your own admission, you have often sinned deliberately and against the light ; and you are wrong in thinking that I despise you. I despise not even the worst of my fellow-men ; for I cannot lay my hand on my heart and say that had I inherited the same tendencies, and lived in the same environment, I should have been better than they. All the same, I hold that it is given to every man to choose between good and evil, and, so far, my poor friend, I am afraid you have chosen evil. I speak not of your stormy life in Texas and Mexico, where your lot was cast among people who were little better than savages, and your moral sense was under a total eclipse. I speak of what you have done since—what you well know was utterly inexcusable and wrong. Granting that the Satanic ruffian whom you took for your guide deceived you in the first instance, why, when you learnt what he was about, did you not refuse his bribe and denounce him to the police ?'

'He had compromised me before I knew what he was about—and I was very poor,' pleaded Langley.

'As though poverty were any excuse for crime! And you had your education and your wits, and your youth. You are a man of thews and sinews. Better live on potatoes and salt than by falsehood and fraud; better sweep the streets than do what you know to be wrong. For the upright man there is only one way—to do right regardless of consequences. And it appears to me that your introducing Hicks to that bank instead of handing him to the police was more flagitious than taking his fictitious bonds. You were as bad as he—I almost think worse; for he is a monster of depravity, absolutely destitute of moral sense, and you are not. You knew better, and the number of lies you must have told—and acted—is simply appalling. And you had no excuse, absolutely none—not even poverty, or fear of it.'

'You forget my little girl, doctor.'

This gave the doctor pause. He had a little girl of his own.

'You mean——' he said.

'I mean that I refrained from denouncing Hicks to the police because I feared exposure, even more for Irene's sake than my own.'

'It might have compromised her future?'

'Exactly. And I had another fear—have it still, indeed—also for her. Hicks is revengeful, and with him murder is only a detail.'

'Ah, now I think I understand. That does make a difference. Yet I cannot admit that it is right to do evil that good may come, even though we could make sure that the good will come; and I doubt whether it is in the nature of things for evil to breed good.'

'I merely suggested the idea for your consideration. You are right, of course, and I don't think I have

anything more to urge. I plead guilty and throw myself on the mercy of the court. But what do you advise? The past cannot be wiped out. You are in possession of the facts; you know my faults. How shall I so rule my life that when next temptation assails me I may be able to withstand it?—that is the question.'

'You want me to prescribe for you?'

'If you will be so kind.'

'Will you follow my injunctions?'

'Yes.'

'On your honour?'

'I promise on my honour—if you think I have any—to obey your behests so far as in me lies,' said Langley earnestly.

'Good. I will reflect, and you shall have my prescription in a day or two. You reflect also. Look into your heart; think of the father whose memory you say you revere, of the wife whom you loved; remember that though the past cannot be obliterated, and you must expect to reap as you have sown, there is still time to retrieve your lost reputation, and leave your daughter a name of which she may be proud, and a memory which she may revere.'

CHAPTER XXX.

A STRANGE STORY.

DR. MORILLON let three days pass before calling again on his patient, who, though still an invalid, was approaching convalescence, and no longer in need of continual medical supervision. He thought it well, ere propounding his remedy, to allow ample time for reflection.

'Are you still in the same mind, Mr. Langley?' was the first question he asked, after they had exchanged greetings.

'Quite, and if possible rather more so,' was the answer. 'You were perhaps a little hard on me the other day, yet not more so than I deserve, and it has done me good. For the first time in my life I see myself as others see me—as men of honour, like yourself, see me.'

'So you are still resolved to follow my advice?'

'I am. I place myself unreservedly in your hands.'

'In that case, as you have had time to reflect, I take it that you are really and sincerely penitent.'

'If I know myself, I am really and sincerely penitent.'

'Then you will prove the sincerity of your penitence by your acts, my dear sir. True penitence makes

atonement. You will restore to those people in America the price of the false bonds which you palmed off on them—twenty-five thousand dollars, I think you said? That is my first order.'

'But I have not the money.'

'Not at the moment, perhaps; but you can save it. You have a good income. You must lay aside a half or two-thirds of your income until the amount is made up.'

Langley looked almost painfully surprised, and his answer was long in coming. He had thought his Mentor would ask him for promises and protests, and he demanded two-thirds of his income for the next five years.

Dr. Morillon smiled rather sadly, and his eyes were troubled. It seemed as though his hope of saving this young man would have to be abandoned. The test was too severe for him; the experiment had failed—for the doctor had no more faith in a repentance without works than in the virtue which has never known temptation.

Langley divined his thoughts.

'It is a large order, and took me by surprise,' said he. 'But you need not be afraid; I am not going to jib. It would never do to begin the new departure by breaking my word. It shall be as you say. I will save up and repay those people all I took from them. What else?'

'I am very glad,' returned the doctor, with a gratified smile. 'When I saw that you hesitated, I feared the worst. Now I can congratulate you. You have won your first victory. If it were possible, I should like you to make good the losses of Hicks' latest victims, for which, by refraining from denouncing him, you rendered

yourself morally responsible. But I will not lay on you a burden heavier than you can bear. The time may come when you will be able to acquit yourself of that obligation. Meanwhile you must work. Idleness is another word for wickedness, and in your case would end in disaster.'

'I mean to work. When I return to America I shall go into business.'

'Not business. Business for a man of your character would be almost as demoralizing as idleness. You must resume the career you abandoned, and become a physician. Followed in the right spirit, it is of all callings the noblest. The physician spends his life in doing good, in ministering to the sick and the relief of suffering. And no calling is so interesting, so rich in opportunities for well-doing.'

'Well, I have had the same thoughts myself. And when? Am I to regard this as an order?'

'Certainly. It is an essential part of my scheme for your redemption.'

'In that case there is nothing for it but to listen and obey; and the idea pleases me. The only objection is that I have forgotten all my theory, and it will take so long. However, when I get back to America I shall set to work.'

'Back to America! Oh no, that would never do. You must not return to America for some time—for a long time.'

Langley regarded his Mentor with a look of dismay and blank surprise.

'Not return to America!' he exclaimed. 'Why? And how otherwise can I qualify for the medical profession?'

'You must not return to America at present, because you might meet with some of your old associates—even with that arch malefactor, Hicks, who has already done you so much harm—and be exposed to temptation before you are strong enough to resist it; and because I want to have you under my eye for at least a twelve-month. As for your studies, that can be easily arranged. There is a good medical school at Lausanne, where I think I can guarantee that the environment will be favourable for your moral renovation. After two or three terms well spent there, you might proceed to Paris, there finish your course, and obtain a qualification which would enable you to practise either in your own country or any other.'

'Oh, doctor, you demand impossibilities! Don't ask me to forego my vengeance!' cried Langley passionately. 'Anything but that.'

'You mean vengeance on your wife's murderer?'

'Yes, yes—on him who killed Ida.'

'But he was never identified. You don't know who he is.'

'I shall find out.'

'How? You have no clue.'

'You are mistaken. I have a clue—the knife I told you about. Let me show it you.'

Langley rose from the sofa on which he had been resting himself, opened a drawer in his cabinet, and produced the Spanish knife which was found near the scene of the murder.

Dr. Morillon examined the weapon curiously.

'Do you really think you can trace it to the original owner, or, rather, its latest possessor before it came into your hands?'

‘I shall try.’

‘Where would you begin?’

‘In Mexico—especially in the neighbourhood of Chihuahua.’

‘That would be like going into the lion’s mouth. You might meet with Doña Juanita and Hicks, and others equally dangerous. You would resume the wild, lawless life of the frontier, and hazard your life on the mere chance of tracking an unknown murderer to his doom! Don’t you think it were better for the crime to go unpunished than that your little motherless girl should be deprived of a father’s care? Moreover, I don’t ask you to forego your revenge—I ask you only to defer it; and perhaps time, which clears up so many mysteries, may clear up this mystery of your wife’s death. If you persist in this mad design, I shall be very sorry. I should regard it as fatal to our hopes. I don’t ask you for an answer now. I only ask you to think well, and hesitate long, before you embark in an adventure which may leave Irene desolate at a time when she most needs a father’s care.’

Whereupon the doctor left the sick man to his thoughts, which were in some confusion; for though Dr. Morillon’s arguments had told, and his parting shot had struck home, Langley could not reconcile himself to the idea of foregoing his revenge, and indefinite postponement seemed equivalent to absolute renunciation. The scent had grown cold already. Further delay—the delay of a year, much more of two or three years—would render it undiscoverable. His sole chance of success, as he thought, lay in going to Texas—so soon as he was well and drew his next money—on a reconnoitring expedition to his old haunts. He felt sure of

finding somebody who knew something of the knife. If it were necessary to his purpose, he would even seek an interview with Juanita, more especially as, since his conversation with Hicks on the subject, he inclined once more to the belief that she might have instigated the crime. Juanita was a fine woman and could be very fascinating, and, as Hicks had said, there are men who would gladly do a great deal for those black eyes of hers—and fellows who have scalped Indians at the rate of fifty or a hundred dollars a head, and are accustomed to carry their lives in their hands, do not stick at trifles. Moreover, the Doña had money, and there were ruffians on the frontier—from Arizona and elsewhere—who for a thousand dollars down, and the promise of twice as much more when the deed was done, would undertake to murder Queen Victoria herself, or the President of the United States.

The objection—the almost insuperable objection—to this theory lay in Juanita's character. It was not in her, thought Langley, to deny herself the full enjoyment of her revenge, the sweetest part of which would be taunting him with his desertion and gloating over her rival's death.

It was, of course, possible that Juanita (informed of his whereabouts by Sol Stanley or Hicks) had written to him in this sense, and that the illegibly-addressed letter—she wrote a frightful scrawl—had miscarried.

This appeared to be the only theory that fitted the facts. Nevertheless, Langley could not disguise from himself that it was pure conjecture, and would require a good deal of corroboration before he might safely take action thereupon. All the more reason why he should go to Mexico as he proposed. Nowhere else

could he hope to find the owner of the knife, and once found, Langley would know how to loosen the miscreant's tongue. A six-shooter presented point-blank at a man's head is a very efficient aid to confession.

It could be done in three or four months, Langley reckoned. Mrs. Parrox and Skipworth would take care of Irene, and when he returned he should recommence his medical studies, and do whatever else Morillon told him. Of the potential dangers which so much affrighted the doctor Langley recked nothing. He had gone through dangers a thousand times greater, and come out of them scatheless. Ida's murder cried aloud for vengeance, and the mystery in which it was shrouded kept him in a continual fever of curiosity and suspense.

'By the time I am strong enough to travel,' he reflected, 'I can draw on Brother-in-law Richard for my next half-year's allowance; and then I shall start, as I hope, with Morillon's approval—for as I must leave Irene here, he may be sure I mean to return. Anyhow, I mean going. . . . When will he let me go out, I wonder? I feel a lot better to-day;' and then he took a book and settled down for a read.

Presently there came a tap at the window, whereupon Langley, looking up, spied Skipworth's smiling face, and promptly beckoned him to come in.

He always liked to see Skipworth, and enjoyed his visits—if the truth must be told, much more than he enjoyed Morillon's; for, though the doctor was sympathetic and wondrous kind, he did not spare the rod, and, however salutary from a moral point of view, it is not soothing to a man's feelings to be told of his faults (even at his own request), and admonished that unless

he does certain things which involve a good deal of self-denial he will be regarded, and must regard himself, as an incorrigible reprobate. In truth, albeit fully resolved to do the doctor's bidding (save as to the American matter), Langley was beginning to dread his venerable friend's admonitions, and look forward to his coming with less of pleasure than of fear.

Skipworth, on the other hand, neither lectured nor questioned him. He was always cheerful, and his remarks, though never profound, were generally amusing. Moreover, he could talk 'till further orders'—an important consideration for a languid convalescent who still conversed with effort.

'Well, how are you getting on to-day?' asked the Englishman as they shook hands. 'Better! That's all right. Better yesterday, better to-day, better to-morrow—that means rapid recovery. We shall be having you out before the week is out. Tant mieux, tant mieux! You cannot help dropping into French when you live in a French-speaking country. I am becoming quite an adept at it. I dreamt in French last night—did actually. Couldn't oblige Mrs. Parrox just now, though.'

'How was that?'

'She had a slight difference with one of the maids, and wanted to slang her—was very irate, in fact. "Just tell Victorine," says she—"just tell her as she's a gradely gobbin." That was quite beyond me. I haven't the faintest idea what "gradely gobbin" means. Besides, it sounds abusive, and, as Victorine is a pretty girl, I should be very sorry to hurt her feelings by blowing her up. The difficulty was how to get out of it without offending Mrs. Parrox and confessing my

ignorance of the Lancashire dialect. A happy thought came to my help. I told her in my gravest manner that it was against the law of the land for any other than her employer to scold a maid, and that if I spoke harshly to Victorine I should get into trouble.'

'Poor Mrs. Parrox! What did she say to that?'

'She said that Victorine was a baggage and a lazy hussy, and that if th' maister (meaning you) did not take her (meaning herself) to some place where she could talk, she should go mad. I thought it a good job for Victorine that Mrs. Parrox could not talk. The poor girl would have got it hot. Hallo, what is this?'—taking up the Spanish knife which Dr. Morillon had left on the table.

'A knife.'

'So I see; and, unless I am mistaken——' opening it. 'Why, this is an old friend! By Jove, what a strange thing! How on earth did you come by it, Langley?'

'An old friend! What do you mean?' cried Langley excitedly. 'Tell me what you mean.'

'I mean that it belonged to a friend of mine.'

'Impossible!'

'Not a bit. There are no two knives like this. *Guerra al Cuchillo—I.H.S.* I know it as well as I know my own nose. And by the same token, there should be a mark on the back. Here it is!'

'That's a cross.'

'No, it isn't. It's a T, and stands for Talbot, the fellow it belonged to. I am surprised he parted with it. That knife has a history—it was a sort of heirloom. But the most astonishing thing is that you should have got it.'

Langley was so staggered by this strange story that he had to collect his thoughts before he could answer.

'You know about my poor wife,' he said at length—
'how——'

'Yes, you told me. She was murdered. But what has that to do with it?'

'Everything. I told you she was murdered; but I didn't tell you that near the spot where it happened was found a knife, which the murderer had evidently left behind him. He had used it to cut a rest in the hedge for his rifle. That is the very knife, and, strangely enough, just before you came in I had made up my mind to look for its owner in Mexico as soon as I am able to travel.'

'You won't find him in Mexico, though. He is in India.'

'In India! Don't keep me in suspense, Skipworth; tell me all you know. It is a matter of life and death to me, and perhaps to somebody else.'

'Well, the last time I saw that knife it was in the hands of Captain Talbot of ours, who commanded my troop when I was in the Old Tin Bellies. I remember—there should be a chip near the end of the pricker, unless it has been ground off. Yes, here it is—and it bore the name of a cutler at Toledo, only some of the letters were nearly effaced. Look! "L-o"—that stands for Lorillo; and "d-o" are the two last letters in "Toledo." Are you satisfied now that I have seen the knife before?'

'Quite. Go on, please.'

'As I was saying, the knife belonged to Captain Talbot. I saw it several times in his room, and he

showed it us one night at mess—it was handed round—and told us how it had come into his possession. His father, old General Talbot, was an officer in the Peninsular War. He commanded the Red Hussars, and one day had the good fortune to rescue a party of guerillas who had attacked a French baggage train and caught a Tartar. A few minutes more, and it would have been all U P with the guerillas. The guerilla captain had been a priest; his name was—let me see—Falcon. Yes, that was it—Falcon. Well, Falcon was very grateful, and as a token of his gratitude, and a memento of the occurrence, presented old Talbot—he wasn't old Talbot then, though—he presented him with that knife, which he had had made expressly for himself at Toledo, and got the Bishop to bless it. *Guerra al Cuchillo* means "War to the knife"—against the French. *I.H.S.* stands for "Jesus hominum Salvator." Falcon, whom his men called El Padre, said it was a holy knife—that he had cut the throats of at least a score of Frenchmen with it, and that it would bring its new owner good fortune. Talbot of ours said he would not part with the knife for anything, so that you may be sure that he did not part with it voluntarily.'

'Did I understand you to say he was in India?'

'Yes; he exchanged into the Red Hussars, his father's old regiment, and went out two or three years ago.'

'Was he ever in America?'

'I don't think so.'

'Do you know his present address?'

'No; but I can get to know. I'll tell you what: if you like, I'll write to him and tell him all about it—give him the entire history. He'll be glad to have news of his knife, and he may be able to throw some light on

things—give you a clue—and that's what you want, isn't it ?'

'Very much, and if you can help me to one, I shall be eternally obliged to you.'

'Don't say a word, old chappie. I shall be only too glad. I'll write the letter to-night—nothing like time present—address Talbot, care of his agents in London. They'll be sure to send it on, and he is sure to answer.'

'A thousand thanks. And pray tell your friend from me that if the knife has been lost or stolen, I shall, of course, hold it at his disposal ; but I hope he will let me retain it for the present as a *pièce de conviction*, and a possible clue.'

'I am sure he will. Talbot is one of the best fellows in the world. But you must not count on hearing from him just yet. If the regiment is up-country, the letter may be a long time in reaching him, or he might be on leave and in the Himalayas, or somewhere. He is a keen sportsman.'

'How long should you think ?'

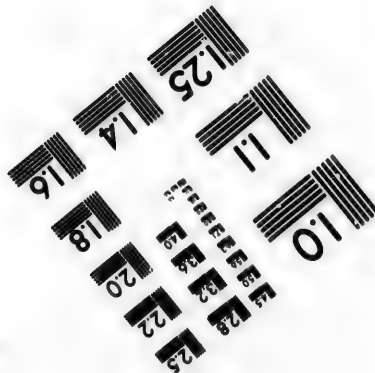
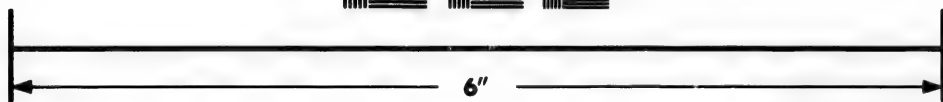
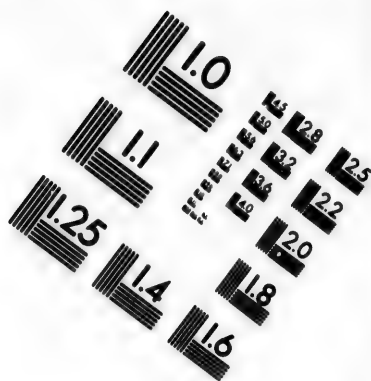
'Before we may look for a reply ? That is more than I can tell. It might be four months or five—it might even be six or seven'—with which vague assurance Langley was obliged to be content.

The next time Morillon called his patient told him that he had decided to defer his proposed visit to America indefinitely.

The doctor, who had been looking anxious, brightened up and smiled pleasantly.

'You have decided wisely,' he said, taking both Langley's hands in his. 'A journey to Mexico just now would be fraught with great danger. I fear you would never return—perhaps be unable to return. This





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is another victory, my dear friend—a victory over self-will and ill-regulated impulse. They say that as a tree is bent so will it grow; but you are still young, and with God's help we shall bend you in the right direction, and I am sanguine enough to believe that you will become an ornament to the profession—perhaps a noble ornament.'

This unwonted praise was so grateful to Langley that he had not the courage to confess that his decision—though he saw now that, from any point of view, it was a wise decision—had not been taken in deference to the doctor's advice.

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CHAPTER XXXI.

SKIPWORTH HAS AN IDEA.

A MIND made up is generally a mind at ease. Disappointment, however bitter, is soon forgotten; but doubt is distraction, suspense is madness, and irresolution fatal to content. Pulled one way by his desire to avenge his wife's murder, pulled another by his wish to follow Dr. Morillon's advice, and his reluctance to leave Irene, Langley had not been happy, and his mental disquietude reacted injuriously on his health and retarded his recovery. But Skipworth's identification of the knife, though it deepened the mystery, resolved his doubts. With no other clue than the knife, no other leading than vague suspicion, his journey to Mexico were a bootless quest, and as it was evident that nothing could be done until he heard from Captain Talbot, he dismissed the subject from his mind, and before long regained his wonted health.

Meanwhile, Dr. Morillon continued his visits, and so soon as Langley was well enough to go out had him often at his own house. But he was sparing of strictures, trusting for his protégé's moral rehabilitation rather to the salutary influence of his new surroundings than to fault-findings, which were sure to irritate and might fail

to cure. Madame Morillon was a dear old lady, who took as much interest in Langley as her husband, and they introduced him to friends as highly cultured as themselves, encouraged him to read, and lent him good books.

Moreover, the doctor, seeing how much he delighted in outdoor pursuits, taught him the rudiments of botany and natural history, for which Langley had both liking and aptitude. They made mountain excursions together. The master interested his pupil in glacier and lacustrian explorations, and when the session of the medical school reopened, Langley, who had in the meanwhile acquired a fair knowledge of French, removed to Lausanne and became once more a medical student.

Skipworth went also. The two men had become close friends, and were reciprocally useful to each other. Skipworth amused Langley with his talk, sometimes dropping words of wisdom unawares, helped Mrs. Parrox with her housekeeping, took Irene for drives and walks when her father was otherwise engaged; and Langley gave Skipworth good advice, acted as his banker, and kept him out of mischief.

'I shall never go to Saxon again,' protested the ex-cavalryman one day to his friend. 'I had enough of it last time. I quite thought that Spaniard would drill a hole through you, and if he had I should have drilled a hole through him. No, I shall never go again—never. I give you my word I won't. But if I do go—if I should be such a fool—for Heaven's sake fetch me back; and if I refuse to come, I give you full leave to take me by the scruff of the neck and make me. But so long as you are good enough to take charge of my money and dole it out to me week by week, I am in no danger. It is only when a fellow has money in his pocket that he

feels like gambling. I am doosed glad I gave you my last remittance. Gad, I believe I am saving money.'

'So you are. I have more than a thousand francs to your credit.'

'And I shall receive fifty pounds at the end of the month; that will make it twelve hundred and fifty more. Just fancy Tom Skipworth with nearly a hundred pounds to the good! I shall be a millionaire if I go on at that rate.'

But he did not go on at that rate. Shortly after the end of the month he disappeared, and Langley, suspecting—or, rather, knowing—whither he was gone, posted right away to Saxon, and found the runaway at the roulette-table, working his system, and so absorbed therein that he did not see Langley until the latter tapped him on the shoulder.

Skipworth looked up with a smile of recognition.

'Don't disturb me,' he whispered. 'I'm on the win. My next stake will just empty my right-hand pocket, and then I shall chuck it up, and you can have my place—if you like.'

'Come along! I want you.'

'One minute. I must stake this napoleon.'

The napoleon was staked and lost.

'Come along! I want to speak to you,' repeated Langley.

'Well, what is it?' asked Skipworth, as his friend drew him away.

'I want you to go back with me.'

'Not if I know it. Why, I am winning! I have made five hundred francs since yesterday!'

'I don't care though you have made five thousand. You must come along.'

'Must! That sounds like compulsion. Who is going to make me?'

'I am.'

'No, you won't. Here I am, and here I mean to stay.'

'Now, look here, Skippy!' said Langley, in a resolute *sotto voce*. 'You asked me—in case you came to this cursed hole again—to fetch you. Well, I have come all the way from Lausanne for that purpose, and I am not going to be balked. You also gave me leave, if you refused to come, to take you by the scruff of the neck and make you; and unless you come along I shall run you out, right away. I am as strong as ever, and I assure you that I can do it without much trouble.'

On this Skipworth, albeit he looked very black, allowed his friend to take his arm and lead him from the room.

Langley's carriage was waiting outside the Casino.

'After you,' said Langley, opening the door.

'You'll surely let me go to the Hôtel des Bains and pay my bill and get my things?' growled Skipworth.

'On condition that I go with you.'

Skipworth assented, and, when he had paid his bill and got his things, was driven off with Langley, chafing furiously and swearing audibly.

'This is a case of kidnapping and forcible abduction, also false imprisonment!' he exclaimed. 'I'll make you smart for this. I'll bring an action against you, and the damages I shall claim will make your hair stand on end.'

'Don't be a fool, Skippy,' returned Langley quietly. 'You know I am doing what you told me, and it is for your own good.'

'For my own good! Man alive! didn't I tell you I was winning? I have won five hundred francs since yesterday.'

'And how much did you lose before yesterday?'

'Oh, nothing to speak of; and you generally do lose at the start when you are working on a system. That's to be expected.'

'Come now, Skippy, what was the figure?'

'A mere trifle—five or six hundred.'

'Sure?'

'Cocksure.'

'In that case, I have saved you fifty pounds, less a hundred francs—for you know as well as I do that if I had not forced you to quit, you would have lost every cent of your last remittance—and yet you repay me with insults and reproaches.'

'You are quite right, and I'm an awful fool,' returned Skipworth, with a deprecatory gesture and in a *mea culpa* voice. 'I am afraid I was born so, and shall never be aught else. Why, oh, why didn't they drown me when I was a whelp? It would have been thousands of pounds in my pocket—thousands and thousands. . . . I didn't mean to hurt you, old chappie. I was a bit riled, that's true, but only half in earnest. You have done me another good turn, and I am greatly obliged to you. . . . All the same'—ruefully—'I do believe that if you had not touched me on the shoulder just then I should have gone on winning. It broke the charm.'

'Never mind about the charm. Have you broken your fast?'

'Of course not. I went in for strict observance of the rules this time. Been fasting like a penitent in Lent, and I was in the vein, too. If you had only

come two days later, I should have had a very different tale to tell.'

'I have no doubt of that. You would have had to tell me that you were fasting because you were penniless. We will get a square meal at Martigny, go on by diligence, and catch the steamer at Bouveret.'

And then they talked about other things. Langley inquired whether Skipworth had heard from Captain Talbot, to which Skipworth answered that if he had he should have informed Langley at once.

'There has hardly been time yet,' he added. 'My estimate was under the mark. As it takes two months to get a letter to Calcutta, we cannot count on a reply under five at the soonest; and Talbot being up-country, it may be seven or eight.'

'It is six since you wrote,' said Langley. 'That is why I asked.'

'I know; and as likely as not I may find the expected letter when I get back.'

Which he did, and the same day handed it to Langley.

'I am afraid you will be disappointed, old chappie. I know I am,' observed Skipworth. 'He is not sure. However, read the letter for yourself.'

Langley was bitterly disappointed; for Captain Talbot's statement made the mystery, if possible, darker and deeper than it had seemed to be or he had deemed it.

After expressing his amazement at the strange way in which the knife he had thought irrevocably lost had been recovered, he said that before starting for Calcutta he put it in his hand travelling-bag, together with divers other things that were likely to prove useful on the

journey. His route was via Calais and Paris to Marseilles, thence to Alexandria by steamer; thence across the desert to Suez, and to his destination by another steamer. The last time he could distinctly remember seeing and handling the knife was between Calais and Paris. One of its accessories was a corkscrew, with which he drew the cork of a bottle of bordeaux he had bought at Amiens. To the best of his belief and recollection, he replaced the knife in his bag. But, as a matter of fact, he never thought of it again until he was crossing the desert, when, requiring the knife for a similar purpose, he sought for it in his bag, and sought in vain—had never, indeed, seen the knife since. He had uncorked the bottle of bordeaux after leaving Amiens, but whether he left it in the railway-carriage, or it had been stolen by some thievish railway fellow, hotel porter, or ship's steward, he couldn't for the life of him say. He had stated the facts, and Mr. Langley must draw his own conclusions. Was sorry he could not give more precise information, but hoped that Mr. Langley would succeed in tracing his wife's murderer all the same. Mr. Langley might keep the knife as long as it was of any use to him—in fact, he rather thought that, all things considered, Mr. Langley was the rightful owner—but if when he had quite done with it he would be good enough to forward it to Captain Talbot's agents in London, Captain Talbot, who valued the weapon for its associations, would be immensely obliged to him.

'This makes confusion worse confounded,' observed Langley, when he had read the letter. 'Even though Captain Talbot could tell me positively whether he left the knife in the railway-carriage, or it was stolen

between Paris and Marseilles, or between Marseilles and Cairo, I don't see that I should be much the wiser.'

'Unless you can ascertain who stole or found it,' suggested Skipworth, 'I am afraid you will have to give it up.'

'In the sense that I cannot take any immediate action. On the other hand, I hold to the belief that, some day or other, the problem will be solved and the murderer unmasked; and then——' added Langley significantly.

'Some enemy did it?'

'Unquestionably.'

'And you think you were the intended victim?'

'That was certainly my first impression—when I believed Sol Stanley was the assassin—and I think so still. My poor wife had not an enemy in the world. But the affair has been so full of surprises that, to tell the truth, I don't feel very sure about anything.'

'Has it ever occurred to you that the murderer may have made a bad shot in a double sense—that he mistook you for somebody else?'

'Neither to me nor to anybody else. What makes you suggest such a far-fetched idea?'

'Less far-fetched than yours—that the murderer came from Mexico. That is far enough, in all conscience. You say it was getting dark at the time, and the ruffian fired from behind a hedge?'

'Yes. But what has that to do with it?'

'A good deal. Were you a strict game-preserver?'

'I had no land. I used to get a few rabbits and partridges on Berners' property, but they were not strict preservers.'

'Were there any strict preservers in the neighbourhood?'

'Several.'

'Well, do you know, it strikes me you have been on a false scent from the beginning. I was brought up in the country, and know a good deal about gamekeepers—also poachers—and this looks uncommonly like a poacher's revenge—misdirected.'

'I suppose you know what you are driving at, Skippy; but I'll be hanged if I do,' interrupted Langley, rather impatiently.

'This is what I am driving at. Inveterate poachers think no more of knocking a keeper on the head—or anybody else who stands in their way—than of wringing a pheasant's neck. Also, some of them are very revengeful. On the other hand, game-preserving squires prosecute, and often persecute poachers without mercy. There is always bad blood between them. Now, what is more probable than that some poacher, thirsting for revenge, and having reason to believe that his enemy was likely to drive down a certain lane about dark in an open carriage, should post himself behind the hedge? It is getting dark, the brambles impede his view somewhat, and seeing a phaeton with two people in it coming along, he lets fly, not caring whether he hits the man or the woman, knowing that in either case he will get his revenge.'

Langley, who had not given Skipworth credit for so much ingenuity, was obviously both startled and surprised by the theory he had broached. It was quite a new light on the subject. It also sounded very plausible. Yet, though impressed, he was not convinced.

'A poacher would not throw away his gun,' he said; 'and you forget the bit of newspaper—an American

newspaper, mind—and the mysterious stranger who was seen hanging about my house and asking questions—and the Spanish knife.'

'Well, the knife is a stumbling-block, there is no doubt of that. All the same, don't you think it is more likely to have found its way into the hands of an English poacher than of a Mexican outlaw?—and throwing away the gun is exactly what a poacher would do. Found in his possession, it would have been a damning *pièce de conviction*—found in a field, and traced to nobody in particular, it told no tales; while as for the bit of paper, there is nothing to show that it ever belonged to the murderer. It might have been blown over the hedge; and the fact of a stranger asking questions at a "pub" about the resident gentry proves nothing whatever. He was probably either a curious pedestrian on his travels, or a burglar taking a turn in the country and looking for a crib to crack.'

'You are really a born detective, Skippy. What surprises me is that somebody more familiar with English ways than I am didn't suggest this before. It seems all simple enough when you come to think about it.'

'So does the discovery of America, only nobody did it till Columbus tried his hand. Ever so many have done it since,' returned Skipworth, with an air of offended dignity. 'And it is very good of you to say I am a born detective. It is a pity they did not make a policeman of me; it is about all I am fit for.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Langley, smiling. 'I give you every credit for originality, and I thought I was paying you a handsome compliment. But we have not got to the bottom of the mystery yet by a long way.'

The first thing is to ascertain whether your theory has any basis in fact. I will write to Richard Berners—No, he would probably object. To Frost, the detective, to make inquiry whether there is, or was, any poacher in the neighbourhood of Birdwood at enmity with a game preserver, and likely to do him an injury. Till we get his answer, we must possess our souls in patience. Here's your letter.'

As Langley handed Captain Talbot's missive to Skipworth, he chanced to glance at the back of it (the letter was folded in the old-fashioned style), and to his surprise observed that it was addressed to the 'Hon. Thomas Chantry Skipworth.'

'Hallo, Skippy! I didn't know you were an honourable!' he exclaimed.

'That's all rot,' quoth Skippy.

'You are not an honourable, then? In that case, why should Captain Talbot—'

'Oh yes, I am entitled to the appellation, if it comes to that, only I have dropped using it, and regard it as rot—in the sense that it has done me a lot more harm than good.'

'You are the son of a peer, then?'

'Why, yes, the late Lord Mountfitchet was my father, more's the pity.'

'He was a bad father, then?'

'Oh no; he did his best, poor old man! I only meant that if I had been worse born I should have been better off. You see, the pater came into the title and estates—which were both strictly tied up and encumbered—late in life, and as he had four younger sons, he could not leave them all fortunes; and it would have been *infra dig.* to put them into trade. So

one went into the navy, one into the Church, a third to the Bar, and I became a Guardsman, with an allowance of five hundred a year, and when my father died he left me ten thousand. There were fellows in the regiment with twice that much a year. With strict economy I dare say I might have lived within my income; but I was not strictly economical—had not been economically brought up. The temptations were too great. I got into debt, tried to redress the balance by gambling, and, of course, made bad worse. You may guess the rest. I had to sell out and take the benefit of the Act. Mountfitchet allows me two hundred a year, my uncle sends me an occasional tenner, and I am—what you know, and shall so remain to the end.'

'Don't say that, Skippy. You are still young, and blessed with health and high spirits. If you will only give up gambling, you may do well even yet.'

'If I thought so! But what am I to do? I know nothing of business; I never learnt a trade. And yet, if I could find something that would keep me occupied, I think I might, as you say, give up gambling. And, do you know, I have a chance'—briskly. 'The other day I had a letter from an old friend in Scotland, who, like me, had to drop soldiering, and for the same cause, who thinks he can get me a place.'

'What as?'

'Manager of a stone quarry.'

'Manager of a stone quarry!' repeated Langley, laughing. 'What do you know about stone quarrying?'

'Nothing. But a fellow could learn, you know.'

'That would take a lot of time, Skippy. No, I don't think I should advise you to become a quarry-master.

I am afraid you would make a mess of it and get bounced. But you should be able to find something in America. You are just cut out for a cowboy, and it would be better marking and herding cattle, or even driving a bullock team, than loafing about here and gambling at Saxon. I shall be returning to America before very long—after I have been a year or so at Paris—and if you would go with me——'

'Would I? It is what I should like before anything else,' broke in Skipworth excitedly. 'Why, I am just dying to go to America and be a cowboy; and with that prospect before me, I will take an oath never to gamble again as long as I live, and save up like a miser.'

'Do you really mean it?'

'Of course I do.'

'It is a thing agreed, then?'

'It is a thing agreed. When you return to America I go with you; and, to tell the truth, I should be deuced sorry for you to go without me, even though I had not the prospect of becoming a cowboy or a bullock-team driver.'

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CHAPTER XXXII.

ROMAINE SCORES.

A FEW days later Langley wrote to Frost in the sense suggested by Skipworth. The detective was both surprised and humiliated that an idea so obvious and plausible had not been brought to his mind by the circumstances of the Birdwood murder, or occurred to him spontaneously; but he imputed the chief blame of this to Captain Langley, who, as he complained to his friend Jim, had put him on a false scent at the outset. By way of leaving no stone unturned, though they were not hopeful as to the result, the two presently betook themselves to Birdwood, interviewed Mr. Berners, and began a fresh investigation, which, though quietly conducted, made a commotion and 'got into the papers.'

And nothing came of it all. Frost heard of several strict game-preservers, one of them a county magistrate, who, when he had the opportunity, invariably punished poachers with the utmost rigour of the law. Also of a certain poacher who was deemed quite capable of shooting him from behind a hedge. It appeared, further, that the gentleman in question often drove about the neighbourhood in an open carriage, accompanied by his wife or his daughter, and had been known to drive past the spot where Mrs. Langley met her death.

Beyond this Frost found it impossible to advance. He received numberless suggestions, but no evidence that would have justified him in making a single arrest. He had his suspicions, of course, and fully believed that Captain Langley's friend had hit on a theory that fitted the facts; but he could not ask an illiterate man to account for his movements on a particular evening twelve months previously; and after so long a lapse of time the memories of the poacher's intimates and enemies would be no more trustworthy than his own affirmations and denials.

So Mr. Frost, foiled in his second attempt to penetrate the mystery of the 'Birdwood tragedy' as he had been in his first, retired discomfited and disgusted from the field.

These things vexed Mr. Berners exceedingly. They revived an almost extinct scandal, and ripped open old sores. The conviction of the murderer would not restore poor Ida to life, and a sensational trial and the resulting publicity and gossip would be a serious annoyance to the family and the firm.

There seemed to be no end to the worries arising out of the Langley connection. One trouble was no sooner out of the way than another turned up. First, that affair of Sol Stanley; then the murder, and the ugly rumours to which it gave being; next, Hicks' forgeries; and as though that were not enough, Langley must needs suggest a new theory and a fresh investigation. Why couldn't he go to America and efface himself, and let his unfortunate relatives lead a quiet life?

A few months after the closing of the second investigation, and as Mr. Berners was beginning to think he had really heard the last of Langley for a long time,

there came upon him yet another trouble, arising from the same undesirable connection.

In this case, however, the immediate cause of the trouble was Romaine.

Albeit that aspiring gentleman continued to be diligent in business, and had always deserved well of his employers, the long-hoped-for offer of a share had not yet been made to him, the reason being, as he rightly conjectured, that Mr. Berners had sons growing up, and meant to make them his partners in preference even to the ablest and most faithful of his employés.

But, as Romaine said to himself, this did not 'suit his book,' and it was necessary to 'make a move.' He already knew a few things which 'gave him a pull,' and in order to round off his information about Langley, obtained leave of absence one Saturday, ran down to Mugby, and interviewed Stanley.

At the outset the gipsy showed decided reluctance to be drawn. His manner, not to put too fine a point on it, was rudely reserved; but when Romaine assured him that he was no friend of Langley's, Sol became fluently communicative, and his invention being stimulated by hatred and several glasses of Irish whisky ('stood' by Romaine), disclosed all he knew, and much more.

According to his account, told with many digressions, and emphasized with strange oaths, Langley had been a 'shocking bad lot' from his youth upward. He had broken his poor father's heart and driven him to commit suicide, wasted the family substance, turned his mother out of doors, and left her to die of want. In Mexico, Texas, and elsewhere he had been the leader of a band of robbers and cut-throats, and committed unheard-of

atrocities. He it was who, as Harry Lelong, had robbed the City and Suburban Company of their bonds. Sol also averred that Langley had instigated and planned the recent frauds on the Bank of England, and received a part of the plunder. Moreover, he had left a wife in Mexico, who was still living. Of this there could be no question. The name of the lady was Doña Juanita Esmeralda. Sol was present at their marriage, and had afterwards been their stud-groom at Chihuahua.

All this was quite notorious at Chihuahua, and Doña Juanita, who, as he believed, still lived there, would doubtless confirm his statement. But whoever went out would have to inquire for Doña Juanita George, not Esmeralda or Langley.

Romaine asked why.

'Because Rufus at that time called himself Captain George, and was married in the name of Junio George,' quoth Sol. 'But there was nothing much in that. All the boys had nicknames.'

'What was yours?' demanded Romaine.

'The boys generally called me Gyp; among the Mexicans I was mostly El Sol.'

When Romaine had done with Sol he tipped him handsomely, hinted that he might have occasion to see him again, and when he got home, added to his narrative a full account of Stanley's revelations while they were still fresh in his mind.

Being a man of some perspicacity, he perceived that Sol had drawn largely on his imagination; but not being sufficiently clairvoyant to distinguish between his fiction and his facts, he set everything down—for future reference.

The most startling information Romaine had obtained

was that which concerned Langley's alleged marriage with Doña Juanita. Sol's statement in this regard seemed too positive and circumstantial to be altogether untrue. On the other hand Trotter, to whom, as the gipsy protested, he had told the same story, had said nothing about it, from which Romaine rightly concluded that Trotter did not deem it worthy of credence. Be that as it might, it suited Romaine's purpose, and it was essential that Mr. Berners should know what Sol had told him, since if Langley's marriage with Miss Berners was illegal, their daughter was illegitimate—in the eye of the law.

That would make a great difference to the Berners family, and he should lay the chief under an obligation by letting him know what had come to his knowledge.

But Romaine, who was a stickler for the proprieties, and held his employer in high respect, had no intention of going to him and saying point-blank, 'I have acquired certain information affecting your family which you would not like to be known outside, and if you decline to give me an interest in the business, I shall make it known.'

It would be a blackguardly proceeding, and the chief might take it in the wrong way—bid him do his worst, and send him about his business.

No, the matter must be managed delicately and circumspectly, and, if possible, without giving offence or letting his real purpose be too plainly seen.

A day or two later Romaine, having decided on his plan of campaign, went into Mr. Berners' room at a time when the latter was not particularly engaged, and said he should be glad to have his advice on a matter personal to himself.

'All right, Romaine. What is it?' returned the chief affably.

Whereupon the clerk explained that Frederick Naden—a young man known to them both, who had lately set up as a ship and insurance broker—had offered him a half-share in the business on conditions which seemed fair and reasonable.

'I have been so long a time with you, and have so great a regard for the house and yourself,' added Romaine, with deference, 'that I should be sorry to take any step I could not justify to my own conscience, or of which you could not approve.'

'I am glad to hear you say so, and I should be sorry to lose you, yet equally so to stand in the way of your bettering yourself. But would you better yourself? Won't you do better to retain your assured position here than risk your savings in an enterprise which, if it should fail, would leave you in a very sorry plight? Creating a new business is terribly uphill, anxious work.'

'That is true, sir, and I thank you for your advice. I shall sleep and think well over it before I give Naden his answer. . . . There is another matter, though, as it concerns your own family, I feel rather reluctant——'

'Speak out, Romaine. What is it?'

'I have seen Sol Stanley, alias Lee—the gipsy, you know.'

'What! the fellow who stole Captain Langley's watch?'

'The same.'

'How came that to pass?'

'Well, sir, as you know, I thought that Dundas, the ruffian who stuck us with those bogus bonds, and Hicks, the forger, who got so cleverly away, were one

and the same. I think so still—so does Frost; and feeling anxious to bottom the matter, I ran down to Mugby the other day and saw Stanley, and from what he told me, I have not the least doubt I am right.'

'From what he told you? Unless I am much mistaken, that fellow would say anything. You informed me some time ago of certain communications he made to Trotter, and I think you agreed with me that they were mostly lies.'

'Well, at the time I certainly thought they might be. But there was one thing he told me so startling and yet so circumstantial and susceptible of proof that I considered it my duty to lay it before you——'

'Pray go on, Mr. Romaine. You considered it your duty?'

'Yes, sir, to lay it before you. Stanley avers that at the time Captain Langley married Miss Ida he had a lawful wife at Chihuahua, in Mexico—that she is living there still, and——'

'And did you really listen to this rubbish?' interrupted the chief sternly.

'Bear with me one moment, if you please, Mr. Berners,' pleaded Romaine. 'Kindly listen before you condemn.'

And then he related in detail all he had heard from Stanley touching the alleged marriage.

Mr. Berners reflected before he replied. He could not believe that this hideous story was true—would not have it true. . . . And yet it was impossible to deny, even to himself, that there might be something in it. Langley had always been somewhat of a mystery, and the charge was grave and distinctly formulated, and concerned others even more than himself.

How he ought to act it was impossible on the spur of the moment to decide. Meanwhile, the first essential was to keep the matter quiet, and to that end ensure Romaine's continued silence, which, if he accepted Naden's offer, might not be easy. Mr. Berners knew that the clerk was aspiring, and suspected that his request for advice was a broad hint that he would like an interest in the concern. On the other hand, he would make an efficient junior partner, and matters could easily be arranged so as to leave the head of the firm practically uncontrolled, and free to admit his sons when the time came, and dismiss Romaine.

'This is a very strange story you have told me,' he observed at length; 'but it comes from a tainted source, and I do not believe it. On the other hand, as you say, it is very precise and circumstantial—so much so that I must take advice. Meanwhile, a still tongue.'

'I assure you, Mr. Berners,' replied Romaine warmly—'I assure you that I never turn over what passes in this room.'

'Oh, I have every confidence in your discretion. Do you think you will accept Mr. Naden's proposal?'

'Well, to tell the truth, I am rather halting between two opinions. For the reasons you have mentioned, and for others which I need not mention, I should be sorry to leave the house. On the other hand, this seems a good chance, though, to be sure——'

'You will best consult your interest by staying with us,' put in the chief quietly. 'I had it in my mind—if my brother is agreeable, of which I make no doubt—I had it in my mind, after our next balance, to improve your position, and make arrangements that would enable you to sign the firm.'

This was enough for Romaine. 'Signing the firm' meant being admitted as a partner.

'Thank you with all my heart,' he exclaimed effusively. 'I shall try to make myself worthy of your kindness by redoubled diligence and care. Anything else, sir?'

'Yes; send a note to Percival, with my compliments, and say that I should like to see him at his early convenience.'

Percival was the firm's and the family's solicitor. But Mr. Berners was a man of too much importance to cool his heels in the outer room of a lawyer's office; his lawyer had to come to him.

When Mr. Percival—an alert, shrewd-looking gentleman, as became his calling—presently responded to the summons, Mr. Berners told him in brief what he had just heard from Romaine, and asked for his opinion and advice thereupon.

'This is a story at third hand,' observed the solicitor. 'The gipsy tells Romaine, Romaine repeats it to you, and you repeat it to me. It would be better if we could have a word with the gipsy; but as he cannot be produced, I should like, with your permission, to put a few questions to your clerk. I always like getting as close to the facts as I can before committing myself to an opinion.'

Whereupon Romaine was called in, and after telling his story over again, and answering a few searching questions, politely dismissed.

'What are the particular points as to which you desire my opinion, Mr. Berners?' inquired Mr. Percival, when he and his client were left to themselves.

'First of all, do you think this story is true? Secondly, if it be true, what will be the effect on our position—'

my brother's and mine—as my father's executors and trustees under Langley's marriage settlement ?'

'It may be true. The possibility is undeniable. Bigamy is a common offence ; and it is equally undeniable that Langley had a strong inducement to commit it—a fine woman with sixty thousand pounds. On the other hand, the only evidence—if it can be called evidence—that he was a married man when he married your sister, is the statement of a gipsy vagabond, made over a glass of whisky in a bar parlour—a vagabond, moreover, who has a bitter grudge against Langley. It is also a question whether a marriage celebrated under the circumstances he describes would be valid—though it may have been legalized subsequently by a civil marriage—if a civil contract be necessary in Mexico, as I have no doubt it is. But as to that, Stanley appears to have said nothing—probably knew nothing—assuming, of course, that his story has some basis in fact. Not that I believe it ; I should go no further than to say that it is a case for inquiry.'

'How would you inquire ?'

'There is only one way. You would have to send a competent agent out to Mexico. Now as to your second question. If your sister's marriage was illegal, it is just as though she died without issue. Her settled fortune would revert to the family, so would the settlement on Langley. As the consideration was to be marriage—I mean if he committed bigamy—the settlement was bad, and his life interest is forfeited—never had a legal reason to be, in fact.'

'I see. And in the event of our refusing to honour Langley's drafts for his interest and the little girl's allowance, what course would he be likely to adopt ?'

'Begin proceedings right away, I should say, and the onus of proof would of course rest with us. We should have to show that he and this lady, Doña Juanita, were legally married according to the laws of Mexico.'

'In other words, our answer to his suit would have to be that my sister was not Langley's wife, and that her daughter is illegitimate.'

'That is what it comes to.'

'Well, I won't do it, Mr. Percival—I won't do it!' exclaimed Mr. Berners, with great warmth. 'I won't cast any such foul aspersion on my sister's memory. Irene is her child and my niece, whatever the law may say, and I shall go on paying this fifteen hundred a year at my own risk—if there be any risk. The innocent child must be provided for, whatever happens, and you will be good enough, Mr. Percival, to add a codicil to my will to the effect that in the event of Irene being disinherited by reason of a flaw in her mother's marriage—for she was no more to blame than I am myself—whatever portion of my sister's fortune might accrue to my estate shall be held in trust for her child. I shall ask my brother to do the same, and I think I can answer for it that he will.'

'Well, from a purely legal point of view, and having regard to your personal interest in the matter, it is not, perhaps, the course a lawyer should advise. All the same, I think it is the right course, and very noble of you.'

Mr. Berners smiled complacently. He believed he was acting nobly, and Mr. Percival's prompt recognition of the fact added to his satisfaction.

'That is enough. I want to do right,' quoth he. 'You will prepare the codicil?'

'Certainly. But don't you think it would be better to ascertain whether there is any truth in the gipsy's story?'

'Why?'

'Because if it be a myth it would be satisfactory to have assurance of the fact. The validity of a sister's marriage is not a matter to leave in doubt, if you can help it. And if you find that Stanley's statement can be proved, you will have a hold over Langley which, in certain contingencies, might be useful.'

'I don't know that I want to have a hold over Langley. He has left England for good. I doubt whether I shall ever see him again. If my poor sister were living, it would, of course, be my duty in her interest to probe the matter to the bottom; but now that she is dead, I would rather assume, in the absence of positive evidence to the contrary, that her marriage was regular—taking, of course, the precautions for the child's protection which I have suggested. There are some things better left alone, and it strikes me forcibly that this is one of them.'

'You are right again. I merely threw out the suggestion for your consideration,' returned the complaisant lawyer. 'I shall prepare the codicil at once, and you will perhaps speak to your brother—'

'Add a similar codicil to his will without further reference. I will make it right with him.'

Mr. Berners had a reason for not desiring to probe the matter to the bottom which he did not confide to Mr. Percival—which, in fact, he confided to nobody but the wife of his bosom. That reason may be expressed in one word—Cordelia (who was again living at the Cottage). The eclipse of Langley, as it may be

called, the troubles which, directly and indirectly, he had brought on the family, and the ugly rumours which had been whispered about him, were only, as she protested, what she had expected ; and she lost no opportunity of adducing them as proofs of the wickedness of men and the accuracy of her previsions. If it should come to her knowledge that it was a question whether Langley was not already married when he led Ida to the altar, her triumph would be complete. Her brother would never hear the last of it ; and if Richard Berners disliked one thing more than another, it was being reminded of his mistakes, even though they had been committed with the best of motives.

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CHAPTER XXXIII.

SURPRISES.

DURING his residence at Lausanne, Langley attended its medical school for several sessions, hearing lectures, relearning his anatomy and physiology, and doing practical work at the hospital, where he acquired a reputation as a skilful operator, 'human carpentry,' as Dr. Morillon put it, being his forte.

The doctor still considered him as in some sort his pupil, superintended his medical education and directed his studies, and by continual watchfulness and wise counsel confirmed Langley in his good resolution and kept him from wandering into devious ways.

Skipworth, whose chief occupation was killing time, protested that his friend had become as steady as a growing tree, and as industrious as a little busy bee, and wished that he also could be kept out of mischief by having something to do. Dr. Morillon, who detested idleness, and held that every sane man has some talent or special capacity, latent or otherwise, found it for him. One day, when he called at Langley's rooms, Skipworth was cutting a grotesque head on the knob of a walking-stick, as well to pass the time as to amuse Irene.

'You seem to have a gift for that sort of thing. Why don't you cultivate it?' observed the doctor, after watching him for a few minutes.

'What would be the use?' demanded Skipworth.

'It would do what you want—provide you with occupation, and, after you become proficient, give you a good deal of pleasure. I shall be glad to introduce you to a very excellent teacher.'

'The teacher, by all means,' said Skipworth gaily. 'I may as well try cutting and carving as anything else; but I shall never become proficient—not I. I am too lazy.'

Lazy or not, he took up the hobby with great zest, to his friend's satisfaction, for it was often all he could do to keep him straight, and carving might peradventure prove to be a prophylactic against gambling.

At length came the time when it was expedient for Langley to proceed to Paris. He had stayed longer at Lausanne than he had originally proposed, partly because he had been doing good work, partly because (having almost abandoned the hope of tracking his wife's murderer) he was in no great hurry to revisit his native land. The longer he remained in Europe the fewer would be the chances of his falling in with any of his old associates on his return to America, or being remembered in quarters where he desired to be forgotten. He regarded it as a fortunate circumstance that of his later acquaintances only Hicks and Sol knew his true name, and that he had not disclosed it to Juanita.

Having meanwhile ascertained that by a short residence at the college where he first studied medicine, and passing an examination which presented few diffi-

culties, he could obtain a full qualification, he had given up the idea of graduating at Paris. He merely proposed to attend lectures in the medical faculty of the University for a term or two, and enlarge his experience by doing practical work at the Hôtel Dieu or some other hospital.

This course had been suggested by Dr. Morillon, who, though well satisfied with his pupil's progress, and fully convinced of his good intentions, feared that he was not yet strong enough to withstand the temptations of two or three years' residence in the fastest of European cities. The doctor, who had great faith in the wholesome moral influence of actual work faithfully performed, was anxious that, as soon as possible, Langley should undertake the responsibility of a practice, the larger and more arduous the better.

Skipworth remained at Lausanne.

'Paris wouldn't suit me,' he said, laughing. 'I have been there before. I should run through my allowance in a month. I shall stay here and carve my way to fame and fortune until you are ready for a start, for I still mean to go with you and set up in the cowboy business.'

Langley, with whom, of course, went Irene and Mrs. Parrox—also a Swiss *bonne*—took a modest *appartement* (suite of rooms) on the south side of the Seine, in the neighbourhood of the Pont Royal. The front-windows commanded a view of the river and the palace and garden of the Tuileries, which was pleasant for the nurse and her little charge, who found Paris vastly more lively and amusing than Lausanne.

They also found friends, or, rather, friends were found for them. Having lived in Paris, and knowing

good people there, mostly of the scientific and professional order, whose influence over Langley, as he thought, would be salutary, Dr. Morillon was able to give him several letters of introduction, and also wrote directly to his correspondents, commending Langley and his little girl to their good offices.

So his sojourn in the gay capital was made pleasant from the outset, and hardly a day passed that Irene (who was growing apace, and learning French from the *bonne*, and the Lancashire dialect from Mrs. Parrox) was not taken to houses where there were children of her own age.

But Langley had no time for social dissipations, even of the more serious sort. His purpose was work, and he stuck to it bravely. His days were spent in the lecture-room, the laboratory, and the Hôtel Dieu; his evenings, for the most part, were given to study. But he always breakfasted and lunched at home with Irene, and on fine days he would hire a barouche and take them for a drive to Neuilly, St. Cloud, Vincennes, or the Bois, or for an outing on the river. It was a happy, busy time, and Langley wrote to Skipworth that the greatest of pleasures was work that interested you, and into which you could throw all your energies.

Never do the hours pass so swiftly and agreeably as when you can be oblivious to their flight. But the way through this world is seldom smooth for long, even for the fortunate few who have never strayed from the beaten track or fallen among pitfalls and quicksands, and when Langley had been in Paris some six months he met with an experience which again reminded him how hard it is for a man to escape from the Nemesis begotten of evil deeds, and how weak good intentions

are apt to prove when put to the test of temptation and trial.

His skill in operative surgery had been recognised by the chiefs of the Hôtel Dieu from the first, and hardly a day passed that he did not 'assist' at some important operation, or spend an hour or two in the accident ward of the great hospital.

One day while he was there five 'cases' were brought in together, all resulting from the same cause—the vagaries of a runaway carriage-horse, which had bolted down a neighbouring street, colliding in its wild career with sundry vehicles and running over several pedestrians. Two of the victims had sustained serious fractures; two others were a good deal knocked about the head, and, as might seem, suffering from concussion of the brain. They received, of course, every attention, and as the house-surgeons had their hands full, Langley was requested to attend to one of the unconscious patients, who, as touching his attire, looked like a gentleman. The others were either coachmen or work-people.

Langley's patient was laid on a bed, and while a dresser wiped the blood and mire from his face, Langley examined his hurts. All seemed superficial, and though they bled freely, and his face, owing to a cut on the forehead and the extravasation of blood in the region of the eyes, was ghastly and temporarily disfigured, Langley opined that he would soon recover consciousness; as, in fact, he did, and opened his eyes.

'Where am I?—and what has happened?' he asked feebly.

Langley told him.

'Ah, I remember,' he continued. 'A fiacre ran into

my tilbury and smashed us all to bits. How has it fared with my servant? His name is Brison.'

Langley sent his dresser to make the desired inquiry, meanwhile scrutinizing the wounded man with more than professional keenness. He fancied they had met before, albeit the blackened eyes, plastered face, and surgically-bandaged head so altered his patient's appearance that he could not for the life of him tell where or when.

Some similar thoughts seemed to be passing through the patient's mind. His eyes were troubled, and he gazed at Langley wonderingly.

'It seems as though I ought to know you,' he said at length. 'Where was it? . . . Ah, I remember. No, it is impossible. The shock has dazed me, and I am half dreaming; and yet—you are very like—My name is Sarasta. What is yours?'—abruptly.

For a minute or two Langley made no answer. His conduct to this man was one of his most painful memories. He had hated him without reason, deliberately provoked him to a quarrel, wounded him desperately, and but for Skipworth's warning had probably killed him outright. True, Sarasta's behaviour had been arrogant and high-handed. So had Langley's. He could claim over him no superiority whatever—was, indeed, probably the worse of the two. And now he was ministering to this man whom he had tried to kill. His erstwhile foe had become his patient, and they were face to face.

The situation was certainly embarrassing. How should he act?—what say?

'You do not answer. I have been guilty of an impertinence, for which I ask your pardon,' added

Sarasta. 'Still, you are very like a certain Monsieur Langley, an American of the North, whom I once met at Saxon-les-Bains—so like that I think you must be a relative of his.'

'I am no relative, Monsieur Sarasta. I am the man himself.'

'Ah, I was not mistaken, then. I have good reason to remember you, monsieur.'

'You have, indeed, and to hate me. . . . I did you a cruel wrong, provoked you to a quarrel with murderous intent, and narrowly missed killing you. My only excuse is that the gambling fit was hot on me, and that I was in a reckless and desperate mood. If regrets and apologies can make any amends for my offence, I offer both in all sincerity. I hope you were not badly wounded.'

'I am sorry to say I was. I suffered much, and shall be lame as long as I live. But I do not see why you should apologize. I was just as bad as you were. I was insolent and arrogant, and if you had not been the better shot, I should have killed you. And you rendered me a great service.'

'Rendered you a service!' exclaimed Langley in surprise. 'Are you serious?'

'Quite. You cured me of my madness. The remedy was severe, yet effectual. As I lay on my bed—and I lay there many weeks—I made a vow never to gamble again. I have kept it, and shall keep it to my life's end. I will not be outdone in generosity. Here is my hand. We are friends, are we not?'

'We are friends,' responded Langley, taking the proffered hand.

At this point the dresser (a student) returned and

reported that Brison's left thigh was broken, and one of his arms badly contused.

'Poor devil! I suppose he will be well taken care of?' queried Sarasta.

'Better a great deal than he could be at his own home or yours. He will be visited every day by some of the first surgeons in Paris, and watched by trained nurses.'

'Good! And how long do you propose to keep me?'

'No longer than you like to stay—unless you live a long way off.'

'No further than the Champs Elysées.'

'So! You may go there when you will—of course, in a fiacre. But you had better not go alone. I dare say Monsieur Pictet'—pointing to the dresser—'will accompany you.'

'*Parfaitement, monsieur*,' responded the dresser. 'With great pleasure.'

'But you will have to be careful for a few days. Keep as much as possible in a recumbent position, and avoid rich foods and stimulating drinks.'

'You are a doctor, of course?' observed Sarasta in Spanish.

'Not quite—yet. But I hope to be before long,' answered Langley, in the same language.

'And I am first secretary to the Mexican Legation, and we live in the Champs Elysées. We shall see more of each other, I hope. In fact, we must see more of each other. By-the-by, are you married?'

Langley said 'No.' He did not think it necessary to explain that he was a widower.

'Well, I am, and I hope to have an early opportunity

of introducing you to my wife. You will hear from me. And now, if Monsieur Pictet will kindly give me his arm. I feel just a little shaky. Thank you. *Adios*. No, I won't say *adios*. *Hasta mañana*, Señor Langley.'

And with that the Mexican went his way, and his former foe betook himself to the operating theatre to assist at the excision of a carious collar-bone.

When M. Pictet returned from his errand, he had much to tell his fellow-students about M. Sarasta's fine house and still finer wife. He had a pavilion in a beautiful garden, all to himself. 'But Madame Sarasta! Ah, you should just see her!' An adorable brunette, with the most perfect figure he ever saw, a rich olive complexion—and such eyes, and teeth, and ripe red lips; and the grace of her manner was only surpassed by the sweetness of her smile. 'Ah, you should behold her. I shall never see her again, unless by a happy chance I catch a glimpse of her as she drives in the Bois; but I shall worship her—at a distance—for ever.'

The others laughed, for Pictet was a susceptible and rather silly youth. He fell in love with nearly every pretty face he saw, and not a week passed that he did not find a fresh flame as adorable and perfectly beautiful as he declared Madame Sarasta to be.

Langley was well pleased that he had met and made his peace with her husband. There was a weight the less on his mind, and he had converted an enemy into a friend, which is always an excellent thing to do. It makes a man feel that he has deserved well of his conscience, and Langley was painfully aware that as a general thing he had deserved ill of his conscience.

Several days elapsed before he heard from Sarasta who began his letter by apologizing for his apparent

neglect in not writing sooner, and explaining the cause. On the evening after his accident he had dined (oblivious of Langley's advice), not wisely, but too well, the result being that he was compelled to send for his doctor and take to his bed. But he was now fully recovered, and hoped to see Langley on the following Saturday, when Madame Sarasta 'received,' and there would be a little music.

A formal invitation card was enclosed, from the tenor whereof Langley perceived that the 'reception' would be something very like a garden-party—and, as he said to himself, 'not in his line.' So far, he had attended no other receptions than those of the wives of physicians and professors, where the subjects discussed were mostly scientific, and the ladies almost painfully plain, his rule being to avoid whatever was likely to interfere with his studies or waste his time.

But every rule has its exceptions, and feeling that it were almost a crime to neglect so favourable an opportunity of cementing his friendship with his ancient foe, he straightway answered Sarasta's letter, accepted his wife's invitation, and, when Saturday came, implemented it by driving to their house.

A fine house, as M. Pictet had described it, set in a garden fair, and shaded by lordly trees.

The day was bright and warm, and the double doors, guarded by two liveried *valets de pied*, were thrown wide open.

There entered with Langley several other visitors, whose names were announced by the valets, as might seem for the information of a lady and gentleman at the opposite end of the hall and near a glass door leading into the grounds, towards which they chanced to be looking.

But as the guests wended across the hall, the pair—presumably the host and hostess—turned with smiling faces to greet them.

The gentleman was Sarasta ; the lady, Juanita !

Langley's heart gave a great bound ; he felt as though he were sinking into a quicksand ; and as their eyes met, Juanita turned deadly pale, and reeled into Sarasta's arms.

But Langley being only one of several guests, nobody was likely to connect madame's swoon with his presence. Moreover, the swoon prevented his resulting agitation from being observed, and gave him time to pull himself together.

Visitors and servants hurried forward to offer help and make impracticable suggestions.

Sarasta appealed to Langley.

'What can it be?' he asked. 'I never knew her to be taken in this way before.'

'The heat and—has she been standing long?'

'Yes, for some time—to receive the guests, you know.'

'That is it, and the air is heavy with the perfume of flowers. The smell of flowers has a strong effect on some people. But it is not a serious swoon. She will be all right presently.'

In fact, Langley, who had been watching her closely, saw that the swoon was already past, and that she was keeping it up a little in order the better to recover from the shock and regain her self-possession.

'What can we get her?' inquired the man of the house anxiously.

'A glass of champagne ; and perhaps these gentlemen will kindly stand aside so as to give her as much air as possible.'

The gentlemen moved back, and a valet ran for champagne.

'What has happened?' asked Juanita, opening her eyes, and looking round with bewildered gaze.

'You fainted, *ma chère*,' said Sarasta. 'Monsieur Langley says it is the heat and fatigue caused by standing so long.'

'Yes, I was feeling rather tired, and the heat is oppressive; but I am better now.'

'Ah, here is the champagne! Drink it. Monsieur Langley says it will do you good.'

Juanita drank the champagne, and the colour returned to her cheeks, and the light to her eyes, and she was evidently herself again.

'Rather a strange introduction,' observed Sarasta, smiling. 'This is the gentleman I told you about, Juanita, who was so kind to me at the Hôtel Dieu. Monsieur Langley—Madame Sarasta.'

Langley bowed, and Juanita made a graceful inclination.

'Would a little turn in the garden be good?' demanded her husband.

'The very thing.'

'Take Monsieur Langley's arm, *ma chère*. He will know what to do if you should not feel well again.'

Juanita took Langley's arm, and they descended together into the garden.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SAVED.

THOSE of the guests who had already arrived were strolling about the grounds, singly and in pairs, talking in groups, or reclining in rustic chairs under the outspreading branches of umbrageous trees; and the improvised buffet in a shady nook, and the orchestra on the lawn, showed that on this occasion Madame Sarasta's reception was to take the shape of an *al-fresco* entertainment.

But Langley had no eyes for these things. The shock had wellnigh bereft him of the power of volition. His mind was in a whirl; he walked mechanically, yielding passively to his companion's leading.

Juanita in Paris, and Sarasta's wife! The woman he had rescued from the Apaches, to whom he had given his hand and plighted his troth in the Quebrada del Pilar under the auspices of a scalp-hunting priest, whose hot temper and insensate jealousy had driven him from her house, and whom he had once suspected of complicity in a cold-blooded murder—this woman, now the wife of another man, was hanging on his arm and walking by his side!

He felt as though he were dreaming. It seemed like

a resurrection, and even more so—as he presently learnt—to Juanita than himself. Fortunately for both of them, she was a consummate actress, and went on smiling and nodding nonchalantly to her visitors, exchanging a word with one and introducing another to her companion with all the aplomb and grace of a model hostess.

Nevertheless, Langley knew from the nervous twitching of her hand that she was scarcely less agitated than himself.

‘This way,’ she whispered in Spanish, and, slipping off unobserved by the crowd, led him to a sequestered alley shut in by a double row of acacia-trees, whose leafy boughs made a grateful shade.

‘Now we can talk!’ she exclaimed, with a sigh of relief. ‘Oh, Junio, I thought it was your ghost come to reproach me for my unkindness. I felt as though the ground were moving under my feet. It was like an earthquake in the Andes. I wanted to run away. If I had not fainted I must have screamed. Oh, it was terrible! And Ramon there looking on, and the guests and the servants! Terrible, terrible! My nerves will never recover from the shock.’

‘That I can understand. I, too, felt very queer—feel so still. But why on earth did you take me for my own ghost?’

‘I thought you were dead. It was reported that you had lost your life by the explosion of a steamer on the river Mississippi. I read the account myself in the *Mercurio*—and believed it.’

‘The *Watersnake*?’

‘Yes, that was the name of the steamer.’

This was quite possible. Langley had taken his passage in the name of ‘George.’

'So you were neither drowned nor scalded to death?'

'Evidently.'

'Then, why did you not come back to me? Words cannot tell how I suffered. I almost died of grief, and repented, oh, so bitterly, my unkindness.'

'Need you ask? Remember what a life you led me, and that little affair of the stiletto.'

'I was mad.'

'Exactly. That was why I made tracks. You were always going mad, and a madwoman with a stiletto is dangerous.'

'Don't be unkind, Junio. I didn't mean to hurt you; you know I didn't. And I was young and foolish, and very much in love. So much! But I am another woman now. I have travelled and seen many lands, mixed in society, and acquired wisdom and experience.'

'And consoled yourself.'

'Cruel! It was after four years. I mourned for you four years. And Ramon was so devoted and importunate that, though my heart was not touched, I accepted him out of pity.'

'Does he know that you were married before?'

'To you only. He knows nothing of *el viefo*' (Esmeralda, her first husband).

'Where did you meet Señor Sarasta?'

'In the city of Mexico. Life at Chihuahua without you was intolerable. Poor Ramon! He is very good—always does what I want—and very rich. His silver-mines in Guanajuata bring him a hundred thousand dollars a year.'

'That was why you married him, I suppose?'

'If you don't cease these cruel taunts, Junio,' she cried passionately, 'I will tell Ramon all—all. He

shall know—everybody shall know—who you are and what you were.'

'Hist! Not so loud. Don't you hear footsteps? Take my arm again. It will look better. You surely did not think I was in earnest?' said Langley, who saw that he was going too far, and had no desire to provoke an explosion.

Before Juanita could answer, Sarasta entered the alley from a side-walk. His were the footsteps heard by Langley.

'I have been looking for you everywhere,' he said pleasantly. 'The guests are nearly all arrived, so I thought I might leave my post. But we must return to them. The music will begin presently. Do you feel better, Juanita *mia*?'

'Very much.'

'Well?'

'Quite. Pray excuse me, Monsieur Langley. I have a word to say to my husband.'

And quitting her visitor's arm, she put hers round her husband's neck, and whispered something in his ear which made them both laugh, and Langley, having fallen back, failed to hear.

It was her revenge for his rudeness. But Langley did not see this.

'What an actress!' he thought. 'Or is it coquetry? She made just now as though she loved me still—would have had me believe that she cared nothing for Sarasta, and yet she seems to be as fond of him as she used to be of me. Which of us is she trying to dupe?'

'Why are you lingering behind, Monsieur Langley?' said the lady, turning to El Capitan with a mischievous smile. 'Don't be offended. I know I was rude. But

I had something to tell Ramon, and husband and wife are allowed to have secrets, you know. But not having a wife of your own, you perhaps don't know, so you must take my word for it.'

'With all my heart. Yes, it is quite natural that husband and wife should exchange confidences, and I congratulate you on having no secrets from your husband.'

'How do you know that I haven't?' she returned, in a tone which told Langley that his answer had piqued her.

'I am sure you haven't,' put in Sarasta fondly—'as sure as that I have none from you. But we must return to our guests. The music is beginning. *Vamonos*, Monsieur Langley.'

When the music ceased the visitors departed, and Langley had to take leave of his host and hostess.

'We want you to dine with us to-morrow evening, if you will be so kind,' said Sarasta. 'Quite *en famille*—only another member of the Legation and his wife besides ourselves. You will come?'

Langley did not want to come. He would rather have kept out of Juanita's way—seen no more of her—and he was doing what he had vowed never to do again—sailing under false colours. But Sarasta had behaved so well and been so kind that he had not the heart to decline his invitation. Moreover, he could not well excuse himself without telling a lie, and he had forsworn lying.

'Thank you,' he said. 'I will come. At what time?'

'Seven. We always dine at seven on Sundays.'
Langley wended pensively homeward.

'Quicksands again!' he thought. 'Shall I never be clear? Will my past never have done rising up in judgment against me? What an extraordinary position! Juanita believes I am dead, and marries another man; I make the acquaintance of the other man by nearly killing him; we make friends, and he invites me to his house, and introduces me to the woman whom he married as my widow.'

'What would Juanita be at, I wonder? Does she still think our supposed marriage was legal? If so, she may claim to be my wife. That would be awful. Or is it her design to lead me on, out of revenge for leaving her, and then accuse me to her husband of making love to her? She is quite capable of it. She has travelled and mixed in society to some purpose. The girl-widow of Chihuahua has become a woman of the world, and deep at that.'

'Shall I tell Sarasta who I am—tell him everything? No, that might wreck his life, and would certainly destroy his peace; and if Juanita means to be true to him—which is possible—it would not be fair to her. If she does! Ay, there's the rub. Anyhow, she had no hand in Ida's death. That's one satisfaction, though it deepens the mystery. . . . I think I did right not to tell her I had been married. It would only have re-kindled her jealousy. . . . My safest course is to keep out of her way. I shall go to this dinner to-morrow night, and call to pay my respects on Tuesday or Wednesday—I must do that—afterwards give her a wide berth, and quit Paris at the end of the term.'

Having come to this conclusion, Langley felt somewhat more at ease, but his mind was still perturbed, and he passed a restless night, and awoke weary and

unrefreshed, with a sense of foreboding which remained with him nearly all the day.

Nothing occurred at the dinner to justify his apprehensions.

Sarasta was kind, and Juanita gracious. She played the part of hostess to admiration, and Langley, knowing what she had been, marvelled at her ready tact and *savoir faire*. And the improvement in her appearance was as marked as the improvement in her manners. Her complexion, which, like most Mexican complexions, was once somewhat sallow, had become clear and bright, her face was fuller, her form more rounded, her bearing more dignified, and her toilette was perfection.

There was no denying that she was a wonderfully fine woman, a woman with whom it were easy to fall in love, and the thought that she might still love him made Langley tremble. He began to fear that if— But he should call only once again, and then—farewell for ever.

Yet her manner to him differed in no way from her manner to Señor Murietta, Sarasta's colleague from the Legation. Neither in the inflection of her voice when she addressed him, nor the expression of her eyes when they met his, did she betray the faintest consciousness of the relationship which had once subsisted between Langley and herself, which made him still more dubious as to the significance of her admissions of the day before. It might be that she was merely putting him to the test, trying to ascertain whether he still loved her, and that her heart was wholly her husband's.

So much the better for Sarasta if it were so. And for him also—yes, for him. The alternative supposition meant danger as well for Juanita as himself.

Yes, it was better so. Juanita was taking the right course, and he should see her only once again.

Nevertheless, Langley went away disconsolate and disappointed—why, he did not like to define even to himself.

Three days later he called again—to pay his respects or leave his card—and half hoping that he might not find Juanita at home. Further reflection had shown him the greatness of his danger, and hardened his resolve to avoid her house henceforth, and at the approaching interview, if she should be alone, to be no more than courteous, shun perilous reminiscences, and depart quickly.

The footman who admitted Langley said that M. Sarasta was out, but his mistress was at home, and ushered him into the salon.

Somebody—presumably Juanita, for the words were Spanish—was singing in the next room—singing divinely. He knew that her voice was good; but if she were the cantatrice it must have been assiduously cultivated.

Presently the servant returned, and informed Langley that his mistress would receive him in the music-room.

As he entered it, Juanita rose from the piano and offered him both her hands.

‘So glad to see you!’ she said. ‘I thought you would come, and told Jules that I should be at home to nobody else.’

‘Is it your habit to keep yourself *au secret* on Wednesdays?’ asked Langley.

‘Oh dear no! But I wanted to have you to myself for an hour, and talk about old times.’

'Why about old times? They were not very happy.'

'My own fault. Didn't I tell you that I had learnt wisdom? I can love now without being jealous—needlessly.'

'So much the better for your husband.'

'For you.'

'I said for your husband.'

'You are my husband.'

'No. Our marriage was irregular, according to the law of the Church, Morales, as I afterwards ascertained, being a "silenced" priest. And in the absence of a civil contract it was invalid, or, rather, no marriage at all, according to the law of the land. Consequently Sarasta must be your husband.'

'You are mistaken. A "silenced" priest still possesses the power to perform some of his functions, and if he does so, and there is any doubt as to their validity, the Church may recognise them and so make them valid. The Church recognised our marriage.'

'When?'

'After you left me. People talked—hinted that we had not been properly married. So I spoke to the Bishop, who is a particular friend of my family, and he caused our marriage to be formally recognised.'

'That may be. But how about the civil contract?'

'According to the law of the province of Chihuahua, cohabitation following a religious ceremony is held as being equivalent to a civil contract. Now are you satisfied, Junio?'

If not satisfied, at least surprised past speaking, Langley knew not what to answer. The lawyer whom he consulted in London had assured him that the

ceremony performed by Padre Morales had no validity whatever, civil or ecclesiastical. But a lawyer is no more infallible than any other body. The man might be mistaken. So might Juanita. What should he do?

'What shall we do?' demanded Juanita, as though she divined his thoughts.

'Nothing. I doubt whether you are right. I think you have been misinformed. We are not in Mexico. This is not Chihuahua, and whatever may be the case there, I am quite sure that here, at least, you are Sarasta's wife.'

'No, Junio; my conscience tells me that I am not—and I love you. I like Ramon—liked him well enough to be happy with him and true to him; but when you reappeared my heart returned to its old allegiance. Yes, I love you. Take me back, Junio. I will be good and sweet-tempered—oh, so good!'

And she put her arms round his neck, and looked up at him with those lustrous eyes of hers, which, when the light of love was in them, Langley had never been able to withstand.

'Juanita *mia*,' he muttered passionately, and, folding her in his arms, pressed his lips to hers.

'Hist! Wheels in the avenue!' she exclaimed, pushing him away. 'It is Ramon coming back. I thought he was gone to St. Cloud. What shall we do?'

'For the present, nothing. We must have time. I must take advice. Sarasta is a good fellow, and undue haste would ruin everything. We must consider well, and have patience—yes, have patience,' stammered Langley.

'You will come again soon, then?'

'Yes, I will come again soon.'

When Sarasta appeared, smiling and affable, Langley

felt so horribly ashamed of himself that he pleaded an important engagement at the Hôtel Dieu as a pretext for hurrying away.

'You will come again soon?' said the man of the house, unconsciously repeating his wife's bidding.

'Certainly, with pleasure,' was the not very sincere answer.

'Be sure you keep your word, now. Sunday is my day; but we shall always be at home to *you*,' observed Juanita carelessly, yet with a significance which Langley fully understood.

He was not only ashamed of himself: he was humiliated. He had yielded at the first summons. Worse still, he felt that he was falling in love with Juanita over again. If he saw her again he should be as wax in her hands; she could do with him what she liked. And if he failed to call again, she would do something desperate—perhaps blurt out everything to Sarasta, and then he knew not what would happen.

Moreover, it was impossible to disguise from himself that he had become Juanita's lover, and to continue his visits under the guise of friendship were the basest treachery to Sarasta, whose wife he still believed her to be.

His first duty was to take further legal advice, so as to get his position clearly defined, and then act.

At that time there lived in Paris a gentleman of the name of Prendergast, an English barrister and a French avocat rolled into one, who was supposed to be highly learned as well in civil as ecclesiastical law.

Upon him Langley waited, and asked his advice as to the matter which was troubling him.

He began by putting the case hypothetically; but

Mr. Prendergast interrupted him with the observation that unless he told him all it would be impossible to advise him to advantage—in fact, he should decline to advise him.

Langley, seeing the force of this, made a clean breast of it.

‘It is a strange case, and not free from difficulty,’ said Mr. Prendergast, when he was in possession of the facts; ‘yet, on the whole, I incline to the opinion of the solicitor whom you consulted in London, that you and this lady went through a form of marriage without being made man and wife. It was performed by a “silenced” priest, which means suspended from the performance of ecclesiastical functions in perpetuity, with one exception—granting absolution. That is a power of which not even the Pope can deprive the worst priest that ever lived. But that only; and I doubt whether any bishop, even a Mexican bishop, and a friend of the family, would recognise a marriage solemnized by a silenced priest, and whether, though he did, his recognition would not be reversed by the higher authorities on appeal. All this, of course, is only material as touching its bearing on the question of civil contract, assuming that in Chihuahua a religious ceremony, followed by cohabitation, constitutes a legal marriage—and for that we have only Madame Sarasta’s word. There is also another point. Being a Mexican, I presume she is a Catholic?’

‘Yes.’

‘And are you?’

‘No,’ said Langley; and he remembered for the first time that this was a point he had omitted to mention to Juanita.

'Then I am pretty sure the knot was not effectually tied. The Roman Catholic Church has never recognised mixed marriages, though it sometimes grants dispensations. But there was none in your case, naturally. Yes, I think there is little doubt that Doña Juanita is Señor Sarasta's wife; and he is in possession, which goes a long way. She would find it very difficult to prove the contrary.'

'So far good. But how would you advise me to act?'

'Are you obliged to remain in Paris?'

'Not exactly obliged, but I should like to stay until the end of the term. Why do you ask?'

'Because my advice is that you leave Paris as soon as you conveniently can. Prevention is better than cure, and from what you tell me I take it that Madame Sarasta is quite capable of taking some step which would compromise you with her husband and make a terrible scandal.'

'You are right. I shall cut the term short, and leave Paris next week. It will be rather ignominious; but in this case discretion is the better part of valour.'

And then Langley thanked Mr. Prendergast for his counsel and paid him his fee, and went away comforted; for he knew what he ought to do, and was going to do it.

When he got home he told Mrs. Parrox, to her unspeakable surprise, to make preparations for starting for America early in the following week. He also wrote to a shipping agent at Havre, inquiring when the next packet would sail for New York, or any other Atlantic port, and, failing a packet, whether he could obtain passages by a sailing ship for the same destination; next to Skipworth, requesting him—if he were still in

the mind to go to America—to make ready to start for Havre at a day's notice.

'If Juanita will only keep quiet in the meantime!' he thought. 'I shall call on her on Sunday, just to keep up appearances, and let her know I am gone by mailing a *p.p.c.* to her address as I drive to the railroad station.'

But Juanita did not keep quiet in the meantime.

On the eve of Sunday—to be plain, on the Saturday afternoon—as Langley was hard at work in his study, the lady in question walked in unannounced, and, before he could find words to express his astonishment, sat down beside him.

'You would not come to me, so I am come to you,' she said quietly.

'I meant to come to-morrow,' returned Langley.

'When the house will be full of people, and we could not have a moment to ourselves.'

'But to come here! Suppose Sarasta were to know?'

'He will know. I am come to stay.'

'What?' exclaimed Langley aghast.

'I am come to stay. My conscience will not permit me to remain one day longer in the house of a man who is not my husband. You are my husband, and here I am. *J'y suis et j'y reste.*'

'Oh, but this is sheer madness. Did—did Sarasta know of your intention?'

'Not at all. We shall write him a letter explaining everything. It will be better than making a scene.'

'But I am not your husband. I have taken advice. I am a Protestant, and the Church does not recognise mixed marriages.'

'But the Church has recognised our marriage. I

am your true wife, Junio. You need have no misgivings. I know how it is. In your heart you love me as much as ever. Did you not take me in your arms on Wednesday, just as you used to do in the old happy time before I made you miserable with my foolish jealousies? And we shall be happy again, dear Junio.'

And again she threw her arms round his neck, and raised to his her lustrous eyes, and two pearly drops rolled forlorn down her peach-like cheeks.

Langley felt as though he were under a spell. How was it possible to resist—resist to the point of expelling from his house this beautiful creature, who loved him so passionately that she was ready to sacrifice everything, to leave a luxurious home and surrender a princely income, for his sake? And he was about to end an intolerable situation by taking Juanita in his arms and keeping her with him, come what might, when the door, which had been left ajar, was pushed open, and a wee lassie with auburn hair and dark eyes ran into the room.

'Papa, papa,' she cried, in her sweet childish voice, 'who is the pretty lady? Do 'oo love her like mamma?'

The effect was electric. Langley rose from his chair; Juanita sprang wildly to her feet.

'Who is this brat that calls you papa?' she demanded fiercely, in Spanish.

'My daughter.'

'You are married, then, to another, or——'

'I have been.'

'And she—she?'

'Is dead.'

'Why did you not tell me this before?'

'Well, I thought you might make trouble.'

'Coward! And I, fool that I was, thought you had been true to me all this time. Who was she?'

'An English lady.'

'An English lady! Oh, if she were here, I would tear her in pieces. Was she beautiful?'

'Yes, and good.'

'You mean that I am not good. You are a brute, Junio! Not content with deceiving, you insult me. Is that her likeness?'—pointing to a portrait hanging on the wall.

'Yes, that is my late wife's likeness.'

Juanita looked at it for a moment, and then, quick as thought, tore the picture from its fastening, dashed it on the floor, and crushed it under her feet.

'There!' she exclaimed. 'In that way I would have treated your English wife. Wife indeed! I hate you, Junio. You have deceived and betrayed me.'

And then, after giving him a look of intense scorn, she marched out of the room with the air of a tragedy queen.

'My darling!' said Langley, taking Irene on his knee and kissing her again and again. 'My darling, you are my guardian angel. You have saved me from a great danger and a terrible mistake—a mistake that would have been a crime, and worse than a crime.'

'And the pretty lady; why was she so angry, and why did she go?'

'The pretty lady is a bad woman, dear. Let us never speak of her again.'

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE WHIRLIGIG OF TIME.

A SWISS-LOOKING *châlet* on the brow of a wooded height, overlooking a charming valley watered by a meandering stream, and a village of 'magnificent distances,' which boasts a mayor and corporation, and calls itself a town, and is really larger and more populous than it seems, many of its buildings being screened by trees and hidden by undulations of the ground.

The name of the town is Auburn (after Goldsmith); of the *châlet*, Brentwood. Like its Helvetic prototypes, it has overhanging eaves and a broad gallery, one side of which is always shady—an important consideration in sunny Georgia.

On the gallery are sitting three men in easy attitudes and white attire, for the time is summer and the day warm.

One of the men is Langley, graver and older looking than of yore, yet vigorous and active withal; another is Skipworth, whose bronzed face and undimmed eyes show that, despite the premature grayness of his hair, he is free from the infirmities of age.

The third of the trio is a young man in the prime of life, tall and stalwart, with a ruddy, sunburnt counte-

nance, fair hair, and long, drooping moustache. People call him Lord Dudbrook. He is the son and heir of the Earl of Mountfitchet, and Skipworth's nephew.

Lord Dudbrook is what his uncle was—a Guardsman—and has come to America on 'long leave' to see something of active warfare. After staying for a while with the Army of the Potomac (strictly as a spectator), he crossed over to Dixie, and 'assisted' (in the French sense) at some of the operations of the Army of Virginia. On his way to Wilmington, whence he hopes to reach England (either directly or by New Providence) in an outward-bound blockade runner, he has called at Auburn to spend a few days with his uncle Tom.

They are discussing the war.

'I durst not say so down there,' observed Langley sadly, pointing towards the town; 'it would be considered high treason; but in my opinion the issue of the struggle is already decided. We are beaten.'

'I don't see that at all,' said Skipworth. 'So long as Lee and the Army of Virginia keep on winning battles, the Confederacy can never be conquered.'

'The Yankees will wear him out, Skippy. They can afford to lose ten men for his one. Besides, though he wins battles, his campaigns are essentially and, I suppose, necessarily defensive. He never advances into the enemy's territory that he has not to retreat. And a defensive war is nearly always a losing war. The chances are in favour of the attack. Is it not so, Lord Dudbrook?'

'Yes, that is the rule, I believe, other things being equal.'

'But other things are not equal in this war. We are cut off from supplies; we cannot dispose of our

produce; our ports are blockaded, and, except in Virginia, the Yankees are winning all along the line. New Orleans is theirs, and Vicksburg and Port Hudson having fallen, they control the entire course of the Mississippi. The Yankees are in Tennessee, and if Bragg had not defeated them at Chickamauga, they would be here by this time. But it is only a temporary check; they will be here.'

'Do you really think so?' queried Lord Dudbrook, in a tone which implied that he did not.

'I am sure, unless Richmond falls, and the war ends within the next few months, which I don't expect. Their way to the sea from Chattanooga lies through this part of Georgia, and one of these days they will overrun the country like a swarm of locusts. That brings me to a proposal I have to make. Women are better out of the way when fighting is in prospect. I want Irene to go to England—you with her, Skippy—also Mrs. Parrox, who is dying to return to the old country. She says she could not rest in her grave if her bones were not laid in English soil.'

'By all means!' exclaimed Lord Dudbrook eagerly. 'We could all go together. The pater would be delighted to see you, Uncle Tom. He told me to say so. I can just fancy his surprise when you turn up at the Abbey.'

'Well, I should like to see him and the old home once more—that's a fact,' said Skipworth, not without a touch of emotion. 'And as I have given none of my people any trouble for these fourteen years past—for which thanks to you, old friend'—turning to Langley—'I dare say they would receive me kindly and let bygones be bygones.'

'I am sure they would,' said Lord Dudbrook. 'My

father has often talked in that sense. He says that going to America was the best thing you ever did, and insisted that I should look you up, even though I had to go a thousand miles out of my way.'

'Your father said that, did he?' rejoined Skipworth, with glistening eyes. 'Well, I almost think—— But what would you do?'—turning to Langley.

'Stick to my post, of course. Remain here.'

'Why not come with us?'

'Duty forbids, Skippy. My sympathies are with the South, naturally; but, as you know, I disapproved of this war from the first, and declined both the offer of a commission in the combatant branch and the appointment of surgeon-general. I thought that my first duty was to my own patients. Because the younger men went to the war that was no reason why the women and children and old folk should be left without medical care. And now I have another tie in the hospital for convalescent soldiers we have established in the town. No, Skippy, I cannot bring myself to desert my people in the hour of their need.'

'What will Irene say?'

'Irene will do what I think is best. Her mother's people wanted her to go to them when the trouble began. I did not think it either necessary or advisable then, and I could not bear the idea of parting with her. It will nearly break my heart now; but her safety and comfort, not my feelings, are the first consideration, and the time is come. I must tell her what we have decided. It is decided you will go?'

'Yes, I think so.'

Langley found his daughter in the drawing-room writing. It was a simply-furnished room, and, save for

a couple of deerskins on the floor, carpetless ; but the vases of flowers, the pictures on the walls, the books on the table, and the open piano, denoted culture and refinement.

As her father entered the room Irene rose from her chair. She was in the first bloom of early womanhood, tall and shapely. Her hair was reddish-brown, as her mother's had been, and she had her mother's features ; but her dark, Oriental eyes, the slightly olive tint of her skin, the pearly whiteness of her teeth, the suppleness of her figure, and the unstudied grace of her movements, were doubtless derived from her Romany ancestors.

'You look as if you had something to tell me,' she said, putting her hand playfully on her father's shoulder. 'What is it ? Nothing serious, I hope. Not as serious, for instance, as your face is at this moment.'

'How would you like to go to England ?'

'Very much—with you.'

'Not with me. With Skipworth, Mrs. Parrox, and Lord Dudbrook.'

The tears came into Irene's eyes.

'Oh no, my father, I couldn't, couldn't go without you.'

'God knows I don't want to part with you, my darling ; but there are reasons—strong reasons. And it will not be for long ; this war cannot last more than another year.'

And then he gave her his reasons for this opinion in the same sense as he had given them to Skipworth, but at greater length.

'But what will you do here all alone ?' she said, when he had finished.

'I shall not be much alone. My work will keep me fully occupied, and it is more likely to increase than diminish.'

'Well, if you really think that I had better go—though I would much rather stay—and on the understanding that if you do not join me in England next year I return to you, I will go.'

Langley accepted the condition, and then mentioned that, as Lord Dudbrook did not propose to start immediately, she would have ample time for her preparations, and recommended her to take as light a kit as possible, and replenish her wardrobe in England.

'And if we are taken by one of those horrid Yankee cruisers, what will become of us? Have you thought of that, father?'

'I don't think the Yankees consider leaving Dixie a crime. You would merely be taken to New York, or some other port, from which you would have no difficulty in getting to Europe.'

On the eve of the travellers' departure, Skipworth took Langley aside, and said he wanted to have a word with him on a very important matter.

'What's in the wind now, Skippy?' asked Langley, with a smile.

'Haven't you noticed anything?'—in a stage whisper.

'Noticed what?'

'Well, I may be mistaken—and it is rather a delicate matter—but between you and me, I rather suspect those two are getting a bit sweet on each other.'

'What two?'

'What two! God bless the man! He is as blind as a bat. Why, your daughter and my nephew, to be sure!'

'Nonsense, Skippy! It is out of the question. Irene is quite too young to think of anything of the sort.'

'Too young! Why, she is eighteen, and in another year at this time will be a twelvemonth older. What would you have?'

'I decline to discuss the subject. I cannot spare the child.'

'Well, 'pon my word! A nice father you are! You would actually stand in the way of your daughter marrying happily just to keep her with you a bit longer!'

'Oh, if you put it in that way. But what reason have you to suppose——'

'Only a few little things I have seen, and which you would have seen too if you weren't her father. And as I am to be *in loco parentis* on the voyage, I should like to know how I am to act in a certain eventuality which I regard as not impossible.'

'I would rather not answer a hypothetical question, Skippy.'

'But you have got to do this time, old chappie, or else I don't start. Dudbrook is a fine, frank, open-hearted young fellow, as anybody may see, and his father says he is a good son—steady and that—so I don't think Irene could do better, and I'm sure he couldn't.'

'But what would your brother say? Irene is not a lady of high degree.'

'He would be deuced glad. Mountfitchet's ideas are quite modern. No nonsense about him. Besides, high degree is all rot, and Irene is fit to mate with a king's son.'

'You are quite right—she is. And she is well dowered, too. Her aunt Cordelia left her twenty-five thousand pounds; and with that and her mother's fortune, and the accumulated interest, she will have a good deal more than half a million dollars when she comes of age.'

'She deserves it every cent, and her husband will be a deuced lucky fellow. Well, shall we put it in this way? If the eventuality to which I have alluded comes to pass, may I say that I am quite sure that, though Irene is overyoung to marry yet, and to part with her would almost break your heart, you will not stand in the way of her happiness if you are really convinced that it is at stake, etc., etc. ?'

'Oh yes, you may say that; but not too much of the etc., etc., if you please, Skippy.'

'Good! That business is settled; and I think you will find that I am not mistaken in what you call my prognosis.'

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CHAPTER XXXVI.

THREE STRANGERS.

SKIPWORTH did not carry out his idea of going into the cattle-raising business. He elected to keep with Langley; and Langley, after obtaining his 'license to heal,' decided to settle in his native State, though not in his native township. Nobody in Georgia knew of his misdeeds, and he was no more likely to be recognised thereabouts as the *ci-devant* 'Harry Lelong' and 'Captain George' than in any other of the United States.

Moreover, he preferred the South to the North, a country town to a big city; and Auburn, where he bought the succession to a practice, suited Skipworth and himself (as the former observed) 'down to the ground.' They could fish in the river and hunt in the woods, the people were kindly and unsophisticated, temptations conspicuous by their absence, and the neighbourhood afforded unrivalled facilities for botanizing and biologizing.

'Just the place for us!' quoth Skippy.

When his brother heard that he had settled in a place where there was no gambling, he gave him a thousand pounds, Langley added another thousand,

and a farm was bought, which, under Skipworth's management, produced satisfactory results and materially helped to keep the pot boiling.

From cutting and carving (which had taught him the use of his hands) the transition to carpentering and cabinet-making was natural and easy, and under the stress of necessity the Honourable Tom, to his own surprise, bloomed into a clever amateur architect and builder. He designed and helped to build the chalet, and there for thirteen uneventful and not unhappy years Langley and himself, Irene and Mrs. Parrox, abode in amity and peace.

Whenever Langley drew on Berners Brothers for his interest and Irene's allowance, he told them how it fared with her, and so soon as the girl was old enough she wrote occasionally to Uncle Richard and Aunt Cordelia, who never failed to answer her niece's 'dutiful' letters, and express a hope that she was being a good girl, and 'minding her book.'

Langley kept his promise to Dr. Morillon in the matter of the bogus bonds. To all whom he had defrauded he made good—of course without disclosing his name—the amounts of which he had wrongfully deprived them—with interest—and they were requested to acknowledge the receipt in the columns of a New York daily paper as 'compensation received from conscience.'

Nevertheless, there were times when Langley suffered keenly from remorse. He had done so many things that would not bear the light, and he often asked himself with a shudder what Irene would think if his past were revealed to her. And he feared—albeit as time went on the apprehension grew less acute—that sooner

or later his sins would find him out. Every now and then his father's frequent saying, 'Remember, Rufus, that as a man sows so must he reap,' was borne in on his mind, and if the saying were true, he had yet to pay the penalty of his wrong-doing. Then the mystery of his wife's death, still unsolved, often troubled him, though he had not ceased to hope that some day it would be solved. Yet, as has already been said, Langley's sojourn at Auburn was not unhappy, and since his arrival there he had striven, not without success, to lead a useful and an honourable life.

The war took the course which he had predicted. The Federals swooped down on Georgia; the State became the scene of bloody battles and innumerable combats. Most of the inhabitants of Auburn village fled—'refugeed,' as they quaintly called it—and its principal buildings were turned into temporary hospitals and convalescent homes for wounded soldiers.

Fortunately for itself, however, and those whom it sheltered, Auburn was not a strategic centre. Armies circled round it, the thunder of artillery rolled down the valley and echoed among the hills, the smoke of battle more than once drifted thitherward, and it was now and then visited by detachments of Federal and Confederate troops, but it never became the theatre of active hostilities, and so escaped the fate which befell many another Southern village and town—destruction by fire.

Langley hung a white flag from the highest point of the loftiest building in the town, and received all the sick and wounded men who were brought to him, and, so far as he could, ministered to their wants. But as his aides were few and inefficient (the Confederacy

being as short of competent surgeons as of all else, save courage, constancy, and desperate resolve), he had to see to everything himself, and was incessantly occupied.

In addition to the regular forces which at that time operated in Georgia and Tennessee, there were several bodies of irregulars, some of whom, on the Confederate side, 'played off their own bats.' Like the guerillas of Spain and the franc-tireurs of France, they were as much marauders as soldiers—captured baggage-trains, took pot-shots at sentries, cut off stragglers, did the enemy all the harm they could, and occasionally maltreated their friends. Some of these gentry preferred plundering to fighting, but when cornered (which was seldom) fought desperately.

One of these irregular bodies, said to be from Alabama (though as to this reports varied), was led by a certain Colonel Dark, whose audacity and enterprise won him a great, albeit ephemeral, notoriety, which is probably the reason why his name does not figure in the history of the war. The Yankees hated him bitterly, even more for his cruelty to his prisoners—whom he generally stripped to the skin and sometimes summarily shot—than for the trouble he gave them and the losses he caused them, and were extremely anxious to capture and hang him. On the other hand, the country-people bore him no goodwill. He quartered his boys on them without asking their leave, and the boys took what they wanted, especially horses, without even going through the formality of tendering Confederate shin-plasters in payment, though it was reported that the Colonel, who liked his joke, occasionally offered his victims promissory notes, payable when the Rebs took Washington.

Late one night, after a harassing day with his patients, Langley was sitting in his own room at home, trying to read, but more than half asleep, when a white-haired old darkey—his sole remaining servant—came in with a scared face and said there were three men outside who wanted to see him.

‘Three men at this time of night! What do they look like?’ asked Langley, rousing himself.

‘Soldiers, massa, and one on ’em looks like he going to die.’

‘Outside, you say? Come along and show me where.’

The darkey led the way to the back of the house, and by the light of the moon, which was nearly at full, Langley perceived three horses, whose drooping heads and mud-bespattered trappings showed that they had been ridden far and fast.

Under a tree hard by were three men—one, whose head was bound with a blood-stained cloth, sitting on the ground with his back against the bole, the others bending over him.

‘What has happened, and what can I do for you?’ inquired Langley.

‘We have had a brush with the Yanks, and got the worst of it,’ answered one of the men. ‘I guess they have pretty near wiped us out. We got cornered by a detachment of the enemy’s cavalry. Most of the boys were shot down or cut to pieces. Only a handful of us fought our way through, and we were followed and dropped—all but those you see. Escaped by the skin of our teeth, you bet; every one hit, the Colonel badly. It was all we could do to get him along; and as we knew of no other place where we could get help, we

just came right here—thought there might be Yanks prowling about the town. Seems to me he has swooned’—scanning the prostrate man’s face.

‘That’s very likely, I think. Lend a hand, and we will carry him into the house. The Colonel, you said. What Colonel?’

‘Colonel Dark.’

‘Oh, Colonel Dark. He has been caught napping at last, then?’ returned Langley coldly.

He had heard a good deal of the gentleman in question, and did not admire him. But it was his office to heal without respect of persons, and the wounded leader was taken into the house and put to bed.

Dark, who was still unconscious, looked death-like and grim. The blood, oozing from his wounded head, covered his face like a hideous mask, crimsoned his garments, and hung in clots from his grizzly beard.

After telling the negro to take the two men into the kitchen and give them something to eat, Langley gave his patient a restorative—which, however, did not restore him to consciousness—and examined his hurts.

In addition to the cuts on his head, he had a flesh wound on his right arm and a bullet-hole in his side.

From the direction which the missile had taken, and the depth to which it had penetrated, Langley did not augur favourably of Colonel Dark’s chances of recovery. He was so weakened with loss of blood that attempting to extract the bullet was out of the question, even though it could be extracted, as to which Langley had grave doubts. All he could do for the moment was to stop the hæmorrhage and bind up the arm.

This done, he cleansed Dark’s face from the blood and mire which encrusted it; but as his patient was

still unconscious and the wounds on his head had stopped bleeding, Langley decided not to disturb the bandages until he could make a more thorough examination by daylight, the resources of his establishment in the matter of artificial light being just then very limited and of indifferent quality.

As the wounded man could not be left alone, Langley went into the kitchen and inquired which of his two followers would watch by their Colonel during the night.

'Soto will,' said the one who had already acted as spokesman.

'Yes, I will,' responded the other; 'I am the Colonel's soldier-servant.'

Something in the man's accent and intonation attracted Langley's attention, and for the first time he scanned Soto's face—a face whose high cheek-bones, black eyes, coppery hue, and lank hair, together with some other peculiarities, denoted an admixture of Spanish and Indian blood, the latter predominating.

'Hablo usted Español?' asked Langley.

'Si, Señor Doctor.'

'I thought so. Have you had any experience in nursing a sick man?'

'Yes, sir. I nursed El Coronel through an attack of *vomito prieto*' (black vomit, otherwise yellow fever) 'at New Orleans.'

'And got it yourself, I suppose?'

'No, sir. I was born at Vera Cruz, and natives of Vera Cruz never have *vomito prieto*.'

'So I have heard. Well, come along, and I will give you your instructions.'

Soto followed the doctor into the room where Dark lay, still insensible.

'All you have to do,' said Langley, as he felt the Colonel's pulse—'all you have to do is to watch, and if he comes to himself, or any noticeable change takes place, pull that bell-rope—it communicates with my bedroom. This unconsciousness may merge into sleep, and if he sleeps the night through I shall think better of his chances of recovery.'

'Oh, he will recover, never fear!' observed Soto confidently.

'I am not so sure about it. He is badly hurt, and has lost no end of blood,' said Langley doubtfully.

'The Colonel will recover,' persisted Soto. 'He always does. When he had *vomito prieto* they said he would die, but I said "No," and I was right. I say "No" now, and I shall be right again. He has as many lives as a cat.'

'But even cats are not immortal, and sooner or later your Colonel must die—whether of his present wounds, to-morrow will probably show. What is the name of your comrade?'

'Breeze—Sergeant Breeze.'

'Well, good-night. Be sure you call me if any change takes place.'

And then, returning once more to the kitchen, Langley bade Jo, his negro servant, provide Sergeant Breeze with sleeping accommodation, and presently retired to rest himself.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE WOUNDED MAN.

LANGLEY, as was his habit, rose at dawn.

His first thought was of his patient, and, throwing on a dressing-gown, he went to see him, albeit doubtful whether he should find him alive.

On opening the door, the first thing he observed was Soto, sitting on a chair by the bedside, with legs outstretched, and his head sunk on his breast. The man was evidently fast asleep, and Langley was about to reprimand him for slumbering at his post, when a sunbeam, entering through the open window, fell on the Colonel's face, bring every line and feature of it into full relief.

'He is still alive,' mused Langley, bending over him—'still alive. But'—starting back—'where have I seen that face before? It is strangely like—like—yet unlike——' (again bending over his patient). 'No, I am not mistaken—changed by time, drawn with recent suffering, pale from loss of blood, disguised by this blood-stained bandage, yet still the same—Hicks! . . . What perverse fate brought him here? The last man in the world I wanted to see, yet my patient and my guest!'

Though since the time of their comradeship Langley's character had changed almost as much as Hicks' features, he was far from having reached that perfection of Christian charity which forgives all things. His loathing was greater than ever for this man, whose late exploits left no doubt that he was as great a scoundrel and ruffian as ever.

Had Langley known the night before what he knew now, he would not have let Colonel Dark darken his door, even though sending him elsewhere had ensured his capture by the Yankees, with the certainty of a short shrift and a long rope.

But the question was of the present, not of the past. Hicks had darkened his door, and Langley had accepted him as a patient and treated him as a guest. Honour and humanity alike forbade turning out of his house a wounded fugitive who had sought his hospitality. The alternative was to continue as he had begun—forget, if he could, what Hicks had been, and do by him as he would do by any other body in like circumstances. This seemed in the strict line of duty. A doctor's business was to heal, and Langley fully shared in his old master's ideas as to the exalted nature of the physician's calling. He would treat Hicks as a 'case' which he had voluntarily undertaken, and either bury or cure him, as the Fates might ordain.

Having come to this resolve, Langley gave Soto a shaking.

'Waken up,' said he. 'The nurse who sleeps by his patient's bedside is as bad as the sentry who sleeps at his post.'

'Very sorry, doctor,' muttered the Mexican, pulling himself together. 'I cannot have been asleep many

minutes, and I was dead tired. The Colonel has been asleep all the time.'

Hicks, roused by the talk, opened his eyes, but there was no sign of recognition in them, and Langley saw that his patient's wits were wandering.

'Rally to me, boys! Rally to me!' he murmured. 'Shoot 'em in their tracks! No quarter! Kill every mother's son of them! Now run for it! Hit, by G—!'

Then he reclosed his eyes, and Langley sent Soto for hot water, and with his help examined Hicks afresh and dressed his wounds.

The wound in the side did not improve on further acquaintance, and after again probing it, Langley came to the conclusion that unless the bullet were extracted his patient would almost surely die. On the other hand, he might, and probably would, die under the operation.

It was a choice between two evils, and Langley, regarding it merely as a 'case,' and ignoring the man altogether, decided for extraction.

But there were others who required his care, and after giving Hicks some medicine and arranging for Breeze to watch for a few hours while Soto slept, he went 'down town,' a good mile from Brentwood, made the round of his little hospitals, and returned later in the day with one of his assistants and a supply of chloroform.

Rather to his surprise, he found Hicks slightly better, and both conscious and sensible, yet so weak withal that he could not raise his voice above a whisper. But he had lost nothing of his characteristic coolness and audacity.

'How do, Rufus Junius? Much obliged for your hospitality,' he said, in his old cynical manner. 'You don't answer. Aren't you pleased to see me?'

'No; and if I had known who you were last night you would not be here now.'

'You are afraid I shall round on you. But you need not be. I shall keep a still tongue, and if you only pull me through——'

'Stop!' exclaimed Langley peremptorily. 'If you threaten me, or attempt to make conditions, I shall leave you to your fate; and if I leave you to your fate, you will be a dead man before this time to-morrow. Afraid of you? No, I am not afraid of you in the least. As you claimed my hospitality—or, rather, your men did for you—and I took you in, not knowing who you were, I shall treat you as a guest, as I should treat any other man who came to me wounded and a fugitive. I shall do my best to cure you, and if I succeed, as to which I am by no means sure, you can do your worst against me.'

'That is a bad saying to an old friend.'

'You provoked it. While as for being an old friend, you could not have done me greater wrong if you had been my worst enemy.'

'Wrong—worst enemy—what—what do you mean?' gasped Hicks, with a troubled, half-terrified look, which Langley attributed to incipient delirium, but was doubtless in part due to physical weakness.

'I mean that you acted a devil's part—tempted me to evil, entangled me in one crime, and almost made me your accomplice in another. I admit I was weak, but that is no excuse for you. Rather the contrary, in fact.'

Hicks smiled sardonically.

'Is that all?' he asked. 'Nothing else?'

'Isn't it enough?' demanded Langley indignantly.

'Isn't it enough that you did your level best to make me as great a villain as yourself, and nearly succeeded? But no more of this. I am here to act, not to talk, and the less you talk the better.'

And then Langley explained to Hicks the nature of his hurts, and left it to himself to decide whether he would have the bullet extracted or not.

'Out with it, and the sooner the better,' was the answer. 'You will give me chloroform, I suppose?'

'Of course.'

'Don't people die under chloroform sometimes?'

'Sometimes.'

'You will play fair, Junius? You—you won't give me too much of the stuff?' and again the same half-terrified look came over his face.

'I don't propose to murder you, if that is what you mean,' said Langley quietly. 'In ordinary circumstances, I would not go out of my way to save your life. I think the world would be better without you; but my business is to cure my patients, not kill them. However, if you would rather keep the bullet where it is, and take your chance——'

'No, no; out with it. I have heard what a clever surgeon you are. Only pull me through, Junius, and you will find I am not ungrateful, though you are so hard.'

Langley summoned his assistant, and the operation was successfully performed—so successfully that the doctor was able to inform his patient, in reply to the latter's naturally anxious inquiry, that he would probably get better if he kept quiet and Soto nursed him well.

but his injuries were so severe that his recovery was likely to be slow.

Then Langley asked what was to be done about Breeze. He could not conveniently entertain three strangers. Moreover, the presence of so many people about the place might lead to inquiries, which were better avoided. The Federal detachment which had wiped out Colonel Dark's band was doubtless in the neighbourhood, and curious touching his whereabouts.

'Send Breeze to the right-about!' whispered Hicks.

But Breeze saved him the trouble by departing on his own motion. When Langley saw the sergeant, the latter said—after inquiring about the Colonel—that he meant to make tracks right away, adding, significantly, 'Before it is too late.'

'What regiment shall you join?' asked Langley.

'Nary one. I shall call myself a Yankee, and take to bumming. That will pay better than soldiering, I reckon. It was very good of you to receive us as you did; and as for him, you couldn't do more though you were his own brother. You are a real Christian, and no mistake!'

Be that as it might, Langley was acting the part of Good Samaritan towards a man whom he did not love, and whom, if he had obeyed impulse and consulted his own interest, he would have abandoned to his enemies.

On the other hand, while he was doing his best for Hicks professionally, and giving him of his best, he treated him strictly as a case in which he took a merely professional interest. His visits were always of the shortest, he seldom unbent, and when Hicks asked irrelevant questions or referred to old times, either answered him in monosyllables or not at all.

Of any revelations that Hicks might make, either then or afterwards, Langley had no fear. His record in those parts was clear. During his long sojourn in Auburn he had so ruled his life as to gain the unfeigned respect of his neighbours, and any statements to the contrary were sure to be disbelieved, and resented in a fashion which would be very unpleasant for the slanderer.

Nevertheless, Langley did not feel as though he were doing anything exceptionally virtuous or noble. His chief feeling was one of vexation at being constrained by circumstances to minister to a man who had exercised so malign an influence over his earlier life, and whom he knew to be a thorough-paced scoundrel. And Hicks took it all so coolly, accepting his host's attentions and hospitality as though they were his by right, generally addressing him as 'Dear boy,' 'Sonny,' or 'Rufus Junius'—bearing himself, in short, as if he were a welcome and honoured guest. This to Langley was naturally exasperating, and he longed for the time when he might tell his undesirable patient that he was well enough to travel, and bid him begone.

About this time Langley received a letter which surprised him, and a call which annoyed him and threatened complications.

The letter was from Mr. James T. Meach. He had heard of Langley's whereabouts from one of the latter's soldier patients whose home was at St. Louis, and wrote to Langley for 'old acquaintance' sake.' It was a pleasant, friendly letter, and mentioned, among other things, that as the war seemed drawing to a close, and some of the ports were already open, he proposed to make a business tour in Georgia for the purpose of buying cotton for shipment to Europe, and that if he

found himself within a hundred miles of Auburn, he should make a point of looking Langley up.

The letter recalled disquieting memories; but Meach was a good fellow from whom Langley had nothing to fear, and he wrote in reply that he should be delighted to see him.

The call (at Langley's office in the town) was from Major Kennedy, commander of the detachment which had so nearly annihilated Colonel Dark's Free Lances. The Major was very anxious to interview the Colonel, and having good reason to believe that the latter had been badly wounded in the encounter, thought he might have been brought to the hospital—under another name.

Langley perceived that he was in an awkward fix. Hicks was not worth lying for, and deception, followed by detection, would of a surety involve the deceiver in trouble. On the other hand, it was simply impossible to betray to his enemies a man who, bad as he might be, was his guest, and had fought on the right side.

'Would you know Dark if you saw him?' he asked the Major.

'I think so. I got a glimpse of him when we were at close quarters. But I have a man with me who knows him well.'

'Well, I will take you and him round the wards. You may perhaps spot him. But we have certainly nobody here who calls himself Dark, nor do I think anybody who answers to the descriptions that are given of him. However, you shall see for yourselves.'

The result was, of course, a foregone conclusion. Dark was not there, and Kennedy had no suspicion that the rebel raider was at Langley's house; for though

several people at Auburn were aware that the doctor was harbouring a wounded Confederate officer, they took care to keep their own counsel.

'He isn't here, that's clear,' observed the Major, after they had gone round the wards. 'I am sorry he has slipped through our fingers; for Mr. Dark, as he calls himself, is a very bad fellow. He deserves condign punishment, and if we catch him he'll get it. He robs and murders without scruple. He even plunders your own people, and they say he has quite a pile hidden away somewhere.'

'Yes, I believe he is, as you say, more than half a brigand,' returned Langley. 'Do you know anything of his antecedents?'

'Well, the story I have heard—and though I do not vouch for its accuracy, it is likely enough to be true—the story I have heard is that he formerly lived in Mexico, where he was known as General Bexar—it is very easy to be a General in Mexico—got mixed up in Mexican politics, played a double part, went over to the French after fighting with the Juaristas, changed sides more than once, and had to make a bolt of it as the alternative of being shot for treachery. He was next heard of at New Orleans, where, under the name of Boxer, he contrived to get nominated Captain in a regiment of volunteers.'

'United States volunteers?'

'Of course. It was only an acting appointment, though. And that was not good enough for him. He wanted a regiment, and that being refused him he resigned, and went to Alabama, where he took another alias, gave himself the brevet rank of Colonel, and raised a regiment of what he called rangers, and I call cut-

throats. They did an infinity of mischief, and I am heartily glad we smashed them up.'

'You really think, then, that Bexar, Boxer, and Dark are merely different names for the same individual?'

'That is my opinion; though, mind you, I would not undertake to prove it to the satisfaction of a jury any more than another thing I heard—that during the short time he was in our service he sold information to the enemy. But this is only a detail; he has done quite enough under his latest alias to deserve hanging, and if we lay him by the heels, it will be a case for a drum-head court-martial and the nearest tree.'

This was not good hearing for Langley.

He had not the slightest doubt that the story told by Major Kennedy was essentially true. It was so like Hicks. The deeds imputed to him, marked by his characteristic ruthlessness, audacity, and readiness of resource, were precisely such as he might be expected to commit.

Yet this man was an inmate of Langley's house, and Langley was bestowing as much pains on his recovery as though he were a hero or a saint! In other words, he was doing his level best to enable Hicks to resume his career of rapine and fraud.

And there appeared to be no help for it. He could not, or at least thought he could not, without incurring the reproach of his neighbours, and being guilty of treachery hardly less base than his own, hand him over to the Yankees.

Neither could he hand him over to the civil power, for the very good reason that no such power then existed. Everything was at sixes and sevens. Sherman was marching through Georgia to the sea. All the Con-

federate forces had been withdrawn from the district; the country was overrun by bummers and stragglers; the only law that prevailed was the law of the strongest, and the only alternative to curing Hicks and letting him go was to cure him and let him be hanged, to the which, in his then mood, Langley could not reconcile his mind.

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CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A DARK THREAT.

BUMMERS were stragglers, camp-followers, and deserters, the flotsam and jetsam of the Federal Army—all vagabonds and pickers-up of unconsidered trifles; many were marauders, who, under the guise of regular soldiers, looted country houses—with or without violence, according to circumstances—and to whom everything portable and valuable, wherever found, was good prize.

But they did not always find what they most desired—coin and plate—since, when invasion became imminent, Southern folk, especially dwellers in the country, made secret hoards—put their silver and gold underground, or wherever else it was likely to escape the ken of Northern depredators.

When invasion became a fact, and the enemy drew nigh, people drove their live stock to secluded spots among the hills and to lonely valleys, and there kept them until the storm was overpast.

Langley had less to fear from these depredators than his country neighbours, since, albeit few men capable of bearing arms were left at Auburn, there was strength enough to resist the ordinary bummer, whose reason for being was dislike of fighting. But as there was no

telling what might happen, and coin was scarce and business at a standstill, and banking facilities had ceased to exist, he made a secret hoard, like everybody else who possessed the wherewithal, which in his case consisted of some three hundred pounds in gold and silver pieces.

But he did not put this money underground or hide it in a hollow tree, whence it might not be forthcoming when most needed; much less in a strong box which would invite attention and could be carried away, or in a fireproof safe that might be blown open by gunpowder, or which a gang of burglarious bummers might compel him to unlock under pain of death. Fifteen hundred dollars would not be worth dying for.

Langley adopted an altogether different plan from either of these. He did not even put his hoard under lock and key—merely hid it where it was least likely to be sought or accidentally discovered. In his study was a cabinet of scientific specimens—botanic, geological, entomological—things at which no bummer would give a second look. In the middle of the cabinet was a well, fitted with wooden trays whereon were spitted butterflies, moths, and other winged insects. The bottom of the well, after the trays were removed, looked solid, but with the help of a crooked nail, which seemed to have been left there by accident, could easily be removed, and access obtained to the little recess where Dr. Langley kept his cash—the gold in rolls, the silver in bags.

An ingenious hiding-place, as its contriver thought, undiscoverable by the uninitiated, and known only to Irene, Skipworth, and himself.

In the meantime Hicks was making a good, and even

a rapid, cure. Langley knew that he had an iron constitution, but his patient's vitality and recuperative force surprised him. Soto was right in saying the Colonel had as many lives as a cat.

A month after his arrival at Brentwood more than half dead, he was moving about with the help of a stick and the Mexican's arm. Langley still treated him with reserve, but it is difficult to keep continually at arm's-length a man who lives under your own roof, especially when that man is your patient, and never loses an opportunity of beguiling or surprising you into a conversation.

Said Hicks to him one morning, when Langley, probably without intention, seemed somewhat more gracious than usual:

'I am sorry I cannot pay you for my entertainment and your professional services now, but if——'

'Who asked you to pay?' demanded Langley, firing up. 'I wouldn't take a cent from you.'

'That's very good of you, Rufus. So like an old friend.'

'Friendship has nothing to do with it. I wouldn't take your money, because I doubt whether it has been honestly come by.'

'Now you are on your high-horse again. How do you know my money has not been honestly come by? You didn't use to be so scrupulous; and you snapped me up so sharply. You may as well hear me out. I was going to say that I cannot pay you now, because, not expecting to be knocked into a cocked hat by the Yanks, or to make you a surprise visit, I did not come provided with funds. But if my bank hasn't broke while I have been laid up, or cleared out by bummers, I shall not find it difficult to discharge my obligations,

especially my obligation to you, which I regard as a debt of honour. I have my faults, I know. I never posed as a perfect character,' continued Hicks, 'but nobody can charge me with meanness. I never value money except when I haven't got any, and I should really like to pay you a handsome fee. It would be a personal satisfaction to me. You have earned it. Let me give you a thousand dollars.'

Langley shook his head.

'Very well—if you won't, you won't. Anyhow, you cannot hinder me from giving the money to a charity—as a thank-offering—just to ease my conscience, you know. It is such a satisfaction to have a conscience free from reproach. You know that, Rufus, don't you? By the way, I think I haven't told you that I made the acquaintance of Señor Sarasta in Mexico.'

'Did you?' said Langley dryly, as though he did not put implicit faith in the statement.

'Yes, I did. And he told me about your duel at Saxon, your strange meeting at the Hôtel Dieu in Paris, and your sudden departure. He thinks very highly of you, Sarasta does. Seemed very anxious to know what had become of you. So did Juanita. I couldn't tell him, of course. Gad, what a life she led you at Chihuahua! Sarasta and she seem to rub along quite comfortably, though. I suppose it's the children. Nothing like a family for taming a termagant. . . . When do you think I shall be well enough to mount my horse and relieve you of my company, dear boy?'

'Well, the wound in your side is healing nicely. In about ten days.'

'Good for you, Rufus! In ten days, then, we shall part, probably to meet no more.'

Langley smiled rather bitterly, as though he thought the hope held out by Hicks was too good to be true. Destiny seemed to have decreed that they were to go on meeting at intervals until one or the other of them should 'go out.'

'There is no telling,' he said; and then, looking at his watch, found that it was time to go 'down town.'

When he returned in the evening, his servant informed him that during his absence Sergeant Breeze had called to see the 'Kernel,' and, after an interview with that gentleman, had quitted looking 'very mad.'

Early next morning Soto saddled his horse and followed suit; but whether his intention was to follow Breeze, or what else, he did not tell Jo, nor did his master tell Langley, who, for the rest, was too glad that the Mexican (whom he had never liked) was gone, to be curious as to the cause of his going or the object of his journey.

Meanwhile Hicks was extremely affable, to his host extremely deferential, and there was a subdued gravity in his manner, as though he felt really grateful for Langley's kindness, and was saddened by the prospect of parting with him, 'to meet no more.' This made his host put on his considering cap.

'What does he want, I wonder?' he asked himself.

For that Hicks did want something, which he was more likely to get by fair means than foul, Langley had no doubt whatever.

He was not long in finding out.

One evening, when Hicks was so far recovered from his wounds that he had decided to leave in the course of two or three days, Langley, happening to need money, drew on his secret hoard for a small bag of

dollars and a few gold pieces. As he replaced the last tray, the door (which he had omitted to bar) opened, and revealed—Colonel Dark!

This was annoying, for though the intruder had not seen Langley get the money, he could not help seeing both the bag and the gold pieces, which the owner thereof had not yet put out of sight.

'Can I have a word with you, doctor?' demanded the Colonel in his pleasantest manner, and with his most winning smile.

'Yes. What is it? I am rather busy just now,' returned Langley testily.

'So I perceive—looking over your specimens,' said Hicks, with a significant glance at the money. 'Well, I propose to leave on Thursday.'

'So you told me this morning.'

'I propose to leave on Thursday, and I want to thank you for all your kindness. I waive the occasional hard things you have said. I even admit that they were not altogether undeserved. I count them as nothing. Words are nothing. I think only of your hospitality. I feel that I am indebted to you for my life—doubly indebted. You might have let me die of my wounds; you might have put the Yanks on my track. You did neither, and, say what you will, dear boy, be as cold as you like, it will make no difference to me. I shall be eternally grateful—yes, eternally grateful.'

Langley took all this with a great many grains of salt. Nevertheless, as it was just possible there might be some truth in his protestations, he answered him not unkindly.

'Well, gratitude is a sign of grace, and if I could believe you were sincere, I should——'

‘What?’

‘Think better of you.’

‘Humph! And that is all?’

‘What would you have more? I could not easily think worse of you.’

‘I am not so sure of that. Well, I am sincere, and I can prove it. I have something to tell you. If you hadn’t been so high and mighty, I should have told you before.’

‘Well, what is it? Go on.’

‘It is about Sarasta. I told you he was very anxious to know where you were, but I did not tell you why. He said he had an important communication to make—very important.’

‘Why didn’t you suggest that he might communicate with me through Berners Brothers, of Liverpool?’

‘Because I was stupid. Actually never thought of it! Of course, Berners know where you are, and I dare say they would like to know where I am. They haven’t forgotten David D. Dundas and the Suburban Sixes, you bet! That was a smart stroke of business, and well put through; and you had a hand in it, too, Junius, though nobody but me knows it. Hart and Dalton are gone over to the great majority.’

‘Have you any idea as to the nature of the communication?’ interrupted Langley impatiently.

The allusion made him feel bad.

‘None whatever. Tried to get it out of him, but he wouldn’t give me an inkling, except that it was something he wished to place on record for your benefit, and, if I chanced to come across you, he desired me to say he had found, or remembered, the address of your Paris bankers——’

'Arthur and Co., Rue de la Paix.'

'Yes, that was it—Arthur and Co., Rue de la Paix. Well, he wanted me to say, if I should come across you, that he proposed to send a sealed letter under cover to them, with a request to forward it to you, if they knew your address; otherwise to keep it until you either called or sent for it. If you did neither the one nor the other, to destroy it at the end of seven years.'

'It sounds very mysterious,' said Langley, who rather thought Hicks was romancing—with an object—though he might conceivably have seen Sarasta. 'When did it happen?'

'About eighteen months ago.'

'When you were figuring as General Bexar?'

Hicks seemed to be quite taken aback.

'How the devil did you find that out? Who told you?' he asked sharply.

This was quite enough for Langley. He had identified General Bexar with Colonel Dark.

'That is my affair,' he said quietly.

'And I suppose that what I choose to call myself is my affair. You know of old that I don't wear a name long.'

'Where is Señor Sarasta now?'

'That is more than I can tell you. There has been a good deal of promiscuous fighting in Mexico lately, and the Juaristas have been getting the worst of it. Sarasta is a Juarist.'

'Which means that he may have been killed?'

'Either that or exiled, or in hiding. Indeed, he mentioned the uncertainty of his future, arising from the disturbed condition of the country, as his principal reason for wanting to communicate with you and to

place on record—what he had placed on record. . . .
Do you think I am sincere now ?'

'In your professions of gratitude ?'

'Yes.'

'I hope so, and I am obliged for the information you have given me,' returned Langley, who, however, was far from sure that Hicks had not concocted the story for a purpose not yet apparent. 'On the other hand, it would have been very mean of you to keep back Sarasta's message.'

'Of course it would, dear boy, seeing how kind you have been. Well, I have not been mean; I have done the right thing. Give me credit for that. And now I want you to add to the debt of gratitude I owe you by doing me another kindness—a mere trifle—if not for my sake, for the sake of old times.'

This was a bad shot. Langley did not like being reminded of old times.

'How ?' he asked coldly.

'Well, I am rather short of the ready—only for the moment—and I want you to loan me two or three hundred dollars.'

'So! Your gratitude is for favours to come. Why, it isn't more than a week since you wanted to give me a thousand dollars.'

'I have a thousand dollars, and a good deal more too, but not here. Not expecting to be smashed up by those infernal Yankees, I did not supply myself with funds. Only two or three hundred—say two—for three or four days.'

'No, Hicks. I have entertained you and your servant and your horses for six weeks, to say nothing of professional attendance. Give you money as well I will not.'

'I don't ask you to give me money as well. I only ask you to loan it me for four days.'

'Anyhow, I won't do it.'

'Is this final, Rufus?'

'Absolutely so. I decline, once for all, to give you two hundred dollars, or any smaller sum, for that is what it would come to.'

Hicks was a good dissembler up to a certain point; but when he lost his temper he lost control over his tongue, and spoke according to his evil nature.

'Be it so, then,' he exclaimed angrily. 'Only fully understand that your refusal to do me this small kindness balances my account. I shall consider myself under no obligation to you whatever.'

'So your professions of gratitude were all lies, then? I thought as much.'

'Mind what you say, Junius, or, by Heaven, I'll serve you as I served——'

'Whom?'

'I mean as I serve people who insult me.'

'Mind what you say, or I'll fire you out of the house. I would as it is, if you had fully regained your strength.'

'How considerate you are! But don't let that trouble you. We may meet again when I have regained my strength; and I am going to relieve you of my presence right away. I shall quit at sunrise.'

'So much the better. I wish you had never troubled me with your presence.'

'Now, look here——' began Hicks furiously, and then, appearing to bethink him of something, rose from his chair and abruptly left the room.

That night Langley did what he had not done for years—at Auburn never before—bolted his bedroom door and put a loaded revolver under his pillow.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A DUMB WITNESS.

WHEN Langley rose in the morning Colonel Dark was gone. At what time there was nothing to show, save that old Jo thought he had heard footsteps in the house about three o'clock, and presently a clatter of hoofs in the road. But these were details which did not greatly interest his master. It was enough for him that he had got rid of his Old Man of the Sea, as he hoped (though not very confidently), for ever.

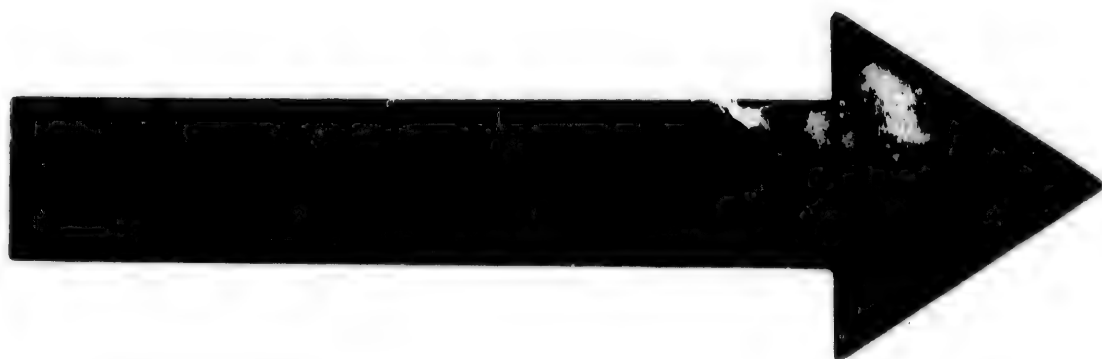
Yet Langley's mind was not altogether at ease. He had entertained, cured of his hurts, and allowed peaceably to depart, an unmitigated rascal who would unquestionably resume his baneful career. Moreover, by refusing his request for a loan he had converted his ancient comrade into a declared enemy, who, as he well knew, would take the first opportunity of avenging the affront. The service he had lately rendered Hicks would count for nothing—it is so much easier to ignore a benefit than forget a grudge—and as he had entertained his unbidden and unwelcome guest solely out of a sense of duty, and made no secret of the detestation in which he held him, gratitude was not to be expected, even though Hicks were capable of gratitude.

Wherefore, taking everything into consideration,

Langley concluded that he had acted for the best—could not, indeed, have acted otherwise; while as for Hicks' threatened vengeance, that was a risk he should have to run. He had incurred and survived greater risks. It was one of the legacies from his stormy past—the penalty of his own wrong-doing. As he had sown, so must he reap. This trouble was of his own making.

Yet not entirely. If his mother had been another woman, or his father had lived a few years longer, his career might have been wholly honourable, his conscience free from reproach. Not the sins only, but even the mistakes, of parents are visited on their children, and fates are so closely interwoven that the innocent often suffer for and with the guilty, sometimes more than the guilty. As Ida had suffered for him; for Langley still held to the belief that she had died for him or because of him. In some inscrutable way his sins had been visited on her, and he shuddered at the thought that they might be visited on Irene. There were times when he bitterly regretted having let her travel to England in Lord Dudbrook's company, and given a qualified approval of Skipworth's matrimonial schemes. How if, after winning Irene's heart, the young Englishman should hear something of her father's antecedents, his wild life in Mexico, his entanglement with Juanita, and his connection with Hicks? Was it not more than probable that he would back out of the engagement, either voluntarily or under pressure from his family? And then, alas for poor Irene! He had done better to keep the child with him. There might be dangers for her in England even greater than the dangers arising from war at home.

The blockade had put an end to regular postal com-



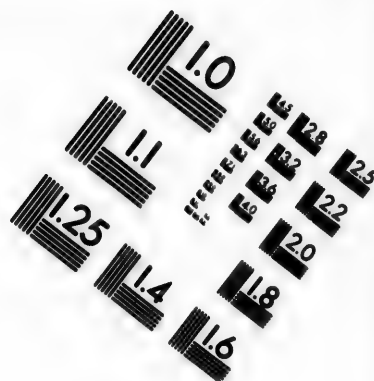
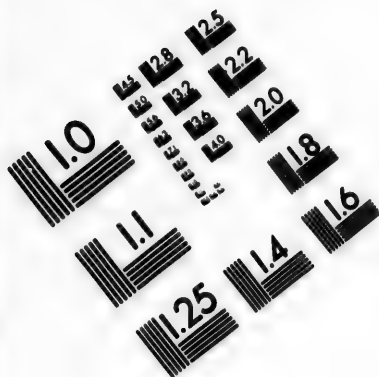
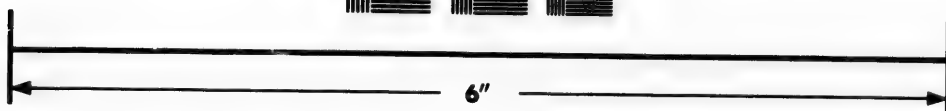
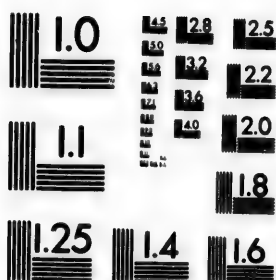


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munication between the Confederacy and Europe, and since Irene's departure he had received from her only two letters, both written shortly after her arrival at Liverpool, and containing little else than an account of her voyage thither, and an assurance that she was well, and as happy as she could be without her father. In her later missive she reminded him of his promise to join her within a year, and playfully protested that if he did not keep his word she should return to Dixie, even though she had to break the blockade a second time and run the gauntlet of the enemy's forces.

Langley quite intended to be as good as his word, and so he had written to her, albeit he was by no means sure that his letter had reached its destination. He proposed to start for Europe as soon as he could leave his patients, and as the discharges now exceeded the admissions, he should probably be able to leave them in the course of a few weeks. To this effect he wrote to Irene, and arranged to have his letter posted by a sure hand at Atlanta, which had been some time occupied by the Federals.

The day after Colonel Dark's departure Langley received another guest, in the person of Mr. James T. Meach, who expressed great delight at the renewal of their acquaintance. Langley's delight was chastened by the fear that his guest, whose mere presence suggested memories both sad and bitter, would want to talk about old times, and might make observations and ask questions which would neither be pleasant to hear nor easy to answer.

Nor was he wrong in this anticipation, the first question asked by Meach after they had exchanged greetings being, 'How is your wife?'

Then, observing the cloud which darkened Langley's countenance, he added :

'I hope you haven't lost her?'

'Yes, I have lost her.'

'Lately?'

'No. A long time—the year after you called on us at Birdwood.'

'Dear, dear! How sad! Mrs. Langley was one of the sweetest and sunniest ladies I ever met. And you are living here all alone?'

'All alone. I have a daughter, but she went to England last fall.'

'Quite grown up, I suppose?'

'She is nearly eighteen.'

'And a great comfort to you, no doubt. Children are a comfort when they turn out well. . . . How time flies, doctor! It seems only the other day that we made each other's acquaintance, and yet it is nearly twenty years since. You remember the trip to Ascot, and the four-in-hand coach, and the conductor with his wonderful collection of trumpets, and how both he and the driver got drunk, and you had to tool us home; and well you did it too. Next time we met was in the Casino at Ems. You were trying your luck at the tables, and a nice haul you made—a big handful of gold pieces and bank bills. Yes, time flies! We are both a bit older than we were then; but you look very fit, as they say in England, and I don't think I ever felt better. Are Berners Brothers still flourishing?'

'I believe so, but it is some time since I heard from them or about them. The war has been a great hindrance to correspondence.'

'You are right. So it has, but I expect we are about through with it.'

And then Mr. Meach, inferring from Langley's manner that old-time talk was not to his friend's liking, took up the more exciting theme of politics and war, as to which they were quite in accord, since, though the Missourian lived in a State where opinions were much divided, and he had taken no active part in the contest, his sympathies were with the South, and he had much to say touching the Yankees and the trouble they had given the citizens of St. Louis.

Langley gave him quarters, of course, and Meach declared his intention of staying at Auburn several days. He had not made much progress with his cotton-buying, and, until peace was restored and the railroads were in running order, did not think he should. There was plenty of the stuff, but he had not come with the intention of investing hard money in a commodity which could not be moved, and might be burned by the first lot of bummers who came along. He would rather take his dollars back to St. Louis.

While host and guest were breakfasting on the morning after Meach's arrival, old Jo startled his master by announcing that the 'Kernel' had just ridden up to the door and wanted to see him.

'Good heavens! You surely don't mean Colonel Dark?' exclaimed Langley.

'No, sah. De oder Kernel—Massa Breeze.'

'Say I will speak to him presently;' and a few minutes later Langley, after asking Meach to excuse him, went to the door.

The sergeant was dismounted and standing at his horse's head. Neither of them looked prosperous. The

horse's ribs were visible under his skin; Breeze was gaunt and lantern-jawed, and his garments were almost in tatters.

'I am sorry to trouble you, Dr. Langley,' he said; 'but I expected to see Colonel Dark, and I understand from your servant that he is gone.'

'Yes; he quitted the day before yesterday.'

'Have you any idea where he went?'

'Not the least.'

'Did he leave any word for me?'

'He did not even mention your name.'

'Well, I call that mean—after my saving his life, too. I was to see him here this morning at this hour, by his own appointment, and he promised to have something for me.'

'That is between you and him,' said Langley coldly. 'All I can tell you is that he quitted before daylight. Yes, you saved his life by bringing him here: I set him on his legs, and I rather think we both made a mistake, sergeant.'

'Well, perhaps we did. Anyhow, he has played me a dirty trick. But he need not think he has shaken me off. I guess I can find him. Soto went with him, I suppose?'

'Soto went last week.'

'The deuce he did! As agent in advance, you bet. So that is their game, is it? I am pretty sure now where the Colonel is gone. I wish I was as sure of getting anything out of him. And now I'll be making tracks. Much obliged for your kindness, doctor; in fact, you have been very kind all through,' said Breeze, as he put his foot in the stirrup.

'Won't you have some breakfast?' asked Langley,

who was nothing if not hospitable, and thought better of the sergeant than of his recent company.

'Thank you kindly, doctor; but, as it happens, I have breakfasted already. All the same, a drop of corn juice would be acceptable.'

Langley told Jo to give the sergeant a glass of whisky, and then returned to his guest, who was out on the stoop (veranda) smoking reflectively an abnormally long cigar.

'I have been entertaining three scallywags against the grain,' observed Langley, 'and one of them has just called to inquire what has become of the other two, or, rather, their boss, a certain Colonel Dark.'

'How came you to entertain scallywags?' inquired Meach, whose bump of curiosity was largely developed.

Langley explained—not everything, for he had no desire to narrate the history of his relations with Limbery Hicks, but enough for the purpose.

'A bad lot,' said Meach. 'I should not like to meet them in a lonely road on a dark night, or by broad daylight, for that matter. All the same, you could not refuse a wounded man hospitality, or hand him over to the Yankees. I dare say, though, they will turn road-agents or take to bumming. Many bummers around?'

'Yes, hundreds of 'em.'

'I have been lucky to keep clear of them, for between you and me I am worth robbing. I brought with me a considerable sum in five-dollar gold pieces and bank bills, which are negotiable without transfer, as the saying is. I should like to put them into your strong box, if you have no objection. They would be safer there than in my carpet-bag.'

'I don't possess a strong box,' answered Langley,

after a moment's thought. 'I don't possess a strong box; but I'll tell you what I can do for you. I can put your money where I put my own, and where I reckon it is as safe as if it were in a bank.'

'That's quite good enough for me. Where do you keep your money, if it's a fair question?'

'In the circumstances I think the question is fair, though I must ask you to keep the answer secret, for obvious reasons.'

'Of course I shall keep it secret, Dr. Langley. To do otherwise would be a gross breach of confidence.'

'Come into my study, then, and say whether you think your money will be safer in my substitute for a strong box than in your carpet-bag.'

'Oh, it is there, is it?' said Meach, following his host. Then when they were in the study: 'What will you bet that I cannot find the place myself, now you have given me a clue?'

'Try,' said Langley.

'Behind those volumes'—pointing to a bookcase which filled one side of the room—'and not a bad place, either.'

'Try again.'

Whereupon Mr. Meach made several other guesses, all equally wide of the mark, and finally gave it up.

'Now I'll let you into the secret,' said Langley complacently; for he was well pleased that Meach had failed to find it out for himself. 'You see this collection of specimens?'—lifting the uppermost tray out of the well.

'I see you are a bug-hunter; and if bugs were gold, you would be passing rich,' returned Meach, rather

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Langley,

contemptuously. 'But I don't see where you keep your cash.'

'Wait a minute.'

And then Langley took out the second tray, and the third, and lastly raised the false bottom, which served the office of a lid.

'There,' he added, 'that's the place; and if you think your money will be safe—— But what's this? Only two bags! Nothing but silver and a piece of paper! The gold is all gone! I have been robbed, Mr. Meach—robbed by the man whose life I saved! Not that I expected gratitude; but—— This beats everything!'—looking at the paper. 'Here, read it for yourself!'

This is what Meach read:

'Received from Dr. Langley, the sum of one thousand dollars in gold, on loan, to be repaid in twelve calendar months from this date, with interest at the rate of nine per cent. per annum.

'As witness my hand,

'FERDINAND DARK.'

'Did you lend him a thousand dollars?' inquired Meach.

'He asked me to, but I refused to lend him a cent. This is his revenge, I suppose, or one of his grim jokes. But observe the scoundrel's craft. If I accuse him of robbing me, he will say that I lent him the money on his note of hand.'

'He knew where you kept your money, then?'

'Not from me. But one day he chanced to come in unexpectedly when I had just taken some out, and it

lay on the edge of the well. I was not without misgivings at the time, yet I hoped he had not divined the secret, and acted on that assumption. It serves me right. I should have been more alert, and removed the money right away. However, there is one comfort—Hicks is not likely to show up at Auburn again.'

'But what has Hicks to do with it at all?' asked Meach, with a puzzled look. 'You said the boss scallywag was called Dark, and that is the name he signs.'

'Did I say Hicks? Well, I may as well tell you—though I did not mean to—that Hicks and Dark are one and the same. He has more names than a Spanish grandee.'

'What! The Hicks I gave the letter of introduction to?'

'Nobody else. What did you know of him?'

'Next to nothing. I made his acquaintance on the river, and met him afterwards at St. Louis, and as he seemed very smart, and behaved and talked like a gentleman, I saw no harm in giving him a letter of introduction to you. It was incautious, to say the least. But the fact is, Mr. Hicks got on the blind side of me. I thought he was a decent fellow, that's a fact. He presented the letter, then?'

'Yes, he presented the letter,' said Langley, with a strange smile. 'And—didn't you see anything in the papers about him a few months afterwards?'

'No. Our Western papers don't quote largely from English papers. Anyhow, they did not then; and shortly after writing that letter I made a business journey to 'Frisco overland, and did not see half a dozen papers for the greater part of a year. Was there anything in print about Hicks at that time?'

'A good deal—in the English papers, also in the principal New York papers.'

'He distinguished himself, then. How?'

'By making bogus paper, and swindling the Bank of England and others to the tune of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars.'

'Great Scott! And this is the man I introduced to you! I assure you, Dr. Langley——'

'No assurance is necessary, my dear sir. I know you did it with the best of motives, and that you were as ignorant of his character and antecedents as—the child unborn.'

'I am glad to hear you say so, Dr. Langley—very glad. All the same, I was greatly to blame for giving a letter of introduction to a man of whom I knew so little. He must have been uncommonly smart, though, to do the Bank of England. But he deserves hanging for robbing you—nothing less. Yes, a very smart man is Mr. Hicks. . . . What you have told me confirms a suspicion I once entertained, and dismissed as absurd.'

'What was that?' asked Langley, with languid interest, for his mind was troubled and his thoughts were travelling backward.

'Well, Hicks called several times at my office, and the day after his last call I missed a knife by which I set a good deal of store and kept as a curiosity. I remembered that I had left him alone, and for a moment the suspicion crossed my mind that he had taken it, not for its value, but because it was a real curiosity.'

'A knife! What sort of a knife?' demanded Langley, in a tone of suppressed excitement.

'A dagger-knife, with a corkscrew and a picker, and some words in Spanish on the blade.'

Langley, now all of a tremble, opened a drawer in his cabinet, took out the '*Guerra al Cuchillo*' knife, and threw it on the table.

'Was it anything like that?' he asked.

'Like it? Why, this is the very knife! How on earth did you come by it?'

'Tell me first how you came by it. Tell me quickly—quickly! It is a matter of life and death.'

'I found it in one of the cars between Calais and Paris, when I was in Europe—behind a cushion, which I pulled out of its place to stretch my legs on. There was nothing to show whom it belonged to, and thinking I might as well have it as the railroad company, I put it in my bag.'

For two or three minutes Langley paced about the room in a state of intense excitement—his face pale, his eyes burning, his lips twitching—unable either to think consecutively or speak coherently. At length, controlling himself by a great effort, he turned to his guest.

'Mr. Meach,' he said, 'you have been instrumental in solving a mystery which seemed insoluble—which for years I have regarded as past finding out. That knife was the dumb witness of a great crime. You have made it speak. I told you my wife was dead. I did not tell you she was foully murdered by an unknown hand, and that all the efforts of the police to trace or identify the murderer were in vain. But now—now I know who did it. The clue found, all the facts point unerringly in the same direction.'

'You surely don't mean that man Hicks?' stammered

Meach, who was almost as pale and excited as Langley himself.

'I mean Hicks. Yes, the man who was brought here hurt almost to death, and whom I entertained and hid from his enemies, and sent away whole, was the man who murdered my wife, and, please God, I will track him to his doom. . . . Wait here until I return.'

And with that Langley rushed in hot haste from the room.

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CHAPTER XL.

SERGEANT BREEZE.

'He's gone mad—stark, staring mad!' muttered Mr. Meach. 'What shall I do? Wait here, follow him, or go down town right away, and tell his colleagues at the hospital what has happened?'

While he was considering which of these courses he should adopt, a clatter of hoofs was heard, and, stepping to the window, Mr. Meach saw a sight which confirmed him in his doubts as to his friend's sanity—Dr. Langley galloping away on a bare-backed steed.

'No following him now,' thought Meach. 'That simplifies matters—reduces my three possible courses to two. . . . Everything considered, I had perhaps better wait here, as he said. I don't see what the hospital people could do. At the speed he is going they could not catch him, and I might find it difficult to convince them that he is gone mad. Queer business altogether. The mention of that knife just set him on fire. Was his wife really murdered with it, I wonder, or is that part of his hallucination? And how could the mere information that it once belonged to me, and was probably stolen by Hicks—how could that prove that Hicks was the murderer? "The dumb witness

of a great crime," he said. And where can he be gone now? I give it up. . . . Yes, I'll wait, and if he does not come back inside—how long shall I say?—inside of two hours, I'll consult with his colleagues as to what steps should be taken in these very strange circumstances.'

Whereupon Mr. Meach betook himself to the veranda, lighted one of his brobdingnagian cigars, tilted his chair back, pulled his hat over his eyes, and settled down to a reflective smoke.

Meanwhile Langley was galloping after Breeze, whom, as the latter had little more than thirty minutes' start, and when last seen was 'going easy,' he hoped to overtake within the hour.

Everything depended on Breeze. Without his help, tracking the murderer to his doom were a well-nigh hopeless quest. Hicks had been gone three days, and in three days a well-mounted man may travel a hundred and fifty miles. Moreover, Langley had no idea what direction Hicks had taken, or whither he was bound. Yes, Breeze must be overtaken, and, save when the hills were too steep for speed, or his horse showed signs of distress, Langley rode him as hard as he could be made to go.

The portentous discovery he had just made had fired his gipsy blood, and rekindled the long-dormant passion for vengeance which he had believed to be extinct.

Now, the desire for revenge—or, as he put it to himself, to bring the murderer to justice—had taken stronger hold of him than ever, as though protracted quiescence had given it fresh vigour.

It maddened him almost beyond endurance to think that he had received Hicks at Birdwood while his hands

were still red with Ida's blood, and become a tacit accomplice in the fraud which he had contrived, still more that after curing him of his wounds he had let him depart in peace.

Langley felt that he had been altogether too punctilious. He should have had Hicks ironed and thrown into the town prison, and there kept until he could be tried by a properly-constituted tribunal. The wretch had committed crimes enough to hang a regiment of pandours.

Though Hicks had not been heard in his own defence—and the evidence against him was slight, probably insufficient to ensure his conviction by an ordinary jury—Langley had no more doubt of his guilt than if he had seen him fire the fatal shot. Hicks had lied to him as to the time of his arrival in Europe—with what object, if not to make it appear that he could not have been in the neighbourhood of Liverpool when Ida met her death? He had imputed the crime to Juanita, and almost persuaded Langley that it had been committed at her instigation, and Dark's look of terror when he was charged with having done him a great wrong, and his fear that Langley would give him an overdose of chloroform, were due to consciousness of guilt. It was only when he saw that his old comrade suspected nothing that he regained his wonted coolness and audacity.

And then the knife! The knife had unquestionably belonged to the murderer. Hicks had stolen the knife from Meach, therefore Hicks must be the murderer. The possibility of Hicks having parted with the knife did not disturb Langley in the least. He was sure—as sure as though he had admitted it in set terms—that Hicks was the man.

He was less sure as to the murderer's motives. Had he, as Langley originally supposed, aimed at him and shot Ida by mistake, or was she alone his destined victim, and, if so, why? True, he bore Langley a grudge. On the other hand, Langley's help, active or passive, was essential to the success of the scheme. But poor Ida had done nothing to incur Hicks' enmity; nor was it obvious how he could profit by her death.

This side of the problem Langley was unable to solve—did not, indeed, seriously try to solve. His mind was dominated by one thought—a thought that left little room for aught else. Hicks had killed Ida, and as Hicks had done to her so he would do to Hicks, even though he should have to follow him to the ends of the earth.

On reaching the brow of a hill some six miles from Auburn, Langley caught sight of Breeze, who the next minute was hidden from view by a turn in the road. Shortly afterwards he viewed him a second time, and the sergeant, hearing the ring of pursuing hoofs, turned promptly round and unslung his carbine. Whereupon Langley pulled his horse into a walk, made signs of amity, and shouted 'A friend!'

'Oh, it's you, doctor!' said Breeze, when they were within speaking distance. 'I beg your pardon for unslinging my piece, but until I heard your voice I really did not know you; and you were riding as though you wanted to catch somebody.'

It was no wonder that the sergeant failed to recognise him at first sight. It had been raining during the night; the soil in that part of the country was strongly charged with oxide of iron, and both Langley and his horse were bespattered from head to foot with red mud.

'I was riding to catch you,' said he. 'I require your help.'

'At your service, doctor. You treated us very well. I hope it isn't for long, though, for if I don't hurry up I may miss the Colonel—and he owes me money. He promised to give me five hundred dollars before he left Auburn. He has treated me badly.'

'I also want to find the Colonel, and if you will help me to find him, I shall be pleased to give you twice five hundred dollars.'

'Why didn't you keep him when you had him? And you said nothing of this when I saw you an hour ago,' observed Breeze suspiciously.

'Because when I had him I did not know what I know now—what I have discovered since I saw you: that before the Colonel quitted my house he robbed me of a thousand dollars in gold.'

'You are surely mistaken, doctor. I know the Colonel is not overparticular. What he wants he takes; but he could not rob the man who saved his life twice over—for you both cured him of his wounds and concealed him from the Yankees.'

'He did, though. I have it under his own hand.'

And then Langley related how the robbery had been effected, and showed Breeze the receipt.

'And you neither lent him money nor promised to lend it?'

'Neither the one nor the other. I refused to lend him a cent. I thought I had done quite enough without that—'

'So you had.'

'And leaving this receipt is like adding insult to injury. It is a defiance—as much as to say, "You

would not give me a thousand dollars—well, I have taken 'em, and you may go to the devil.'"

'You are quite right, doctor. I am no better than I should be myself. I have led a wild life, but I never behaved ill to those who behaved well to me. Requiring hospitality and kindness with robbery is too bad for anything—as bad as murder.'

'Colonel Dark is a murderer. I know something of his career; and I learnt this morning what I wish I had known sooner, that years ago, in England, he killed a poor lady who had done him no harm. It is more on account of that heinous crime than for taking my money that I want to bring him to justice; and, as I said just now, I will make it worth your while to help me in the matter.'

'And I will help you, doctor. There's my hand on it. The Colonel deserves no consideration from me, even apart from his conduct to you, who treated us all so handsomely. And blood is thicker than water. Old Jo told me your father was an English gentleman, and I am from the old country myself. I have served the Queen, also Uncle Sam, and fought for Dixie. Yes, I've led a wildish life, and been in some tight fixes; but I never betrayed a friend, or returned evil for good, much less committed a cold-blooded murder. You may depend on me, doctor. I'm your man for this business.'

'Good! Do you know where Dark is?'

'I cannot say I know; I expected to learn something of his plans when I called at your house this morning. But, as you are aware, he went away without telling me. All the same, by putting two and two together, I can form a pretty shrewd guess. I think he is very

likely to be found in the Dug Down Mountains. That is where I was going. A quiet little spot in the hills, off the beaten track, we once discovered accidentally when we had lost our way. There is a creek, a deserted mine, a little frame house, and a few farm buildings, all more or less in ruins; but no people. I suppose they did not find enough pay dirt, so gave it up. Anyhow, it's a pretty spot, and there's lots of game. The Colonel was quite taken with it. Just the place, he said, for a man to lie by in when the country got too hot to hold him; and, as you know, he has pressing need to lie by for a while. The Yankees want him badly, and he cannot expect that you will submit quietly to being robbed. And there is another thing: he has money and valuables put away somewhere, and I have a strong suspicion that the hiding-place is in the neighbourhood of the Old Mine.'

'The Old Mine! Is that the name of the place?'

'It is the name we gave it, and the only name we know. In my opinion,' continued the sergeant, 'the Colonel sent Soto in advance to see whether the coast was clear, get a few provisions together, and make things a bit comfortable. He is a very nandy chap, Soto is.'

'How far is it off, this Old Mine?'

'Three days' march.'

'Well, if you will return with me—I must get a saddle and a few other things—we will set out right away.'

'Nobody else?' asked Breeze as they turned their horses' heads towards Auburn.

'Why should we want anybody else? You and I are surely a match for Dark and Soto.'

'Two against two. That's right enough as a general principle, and if you propose to shoot the Colonel at sight; but you said something about bringing him to justice. That means taking him alive, and the Colonel is an awkward customer to take alive. He is as fierce as a catamount and as slippery as an eel. Besides, there may be others with him.'

'Others! How so? You spoke only of Soto.'

'Well, I have just been thinking that the Colonel may have picked up a few of the boys who were with him before we were smashed up—with a view to future operations and present safety.'

'Would two, in addition to ourselves, be sufficient for the purpose, do you think?'

'Three would be better, four better still. It is a wise rule not to underrate your enemy—and the Colonel is mighty smart. He won't be easy caught alive, you bet, unless we can take him unawares.'

'Catch him alive we must. Shooting him down or running him through wouldn't be good enough. Men are scarce just now, but I think I can find three or four of the right sort. But there is no time to lose. Quick march, if you please, Sergeant Breeze.'

An hour later they were at Brentwood. Mr. Meach was still on the veranda. He had smoked himself asleep.

'Back already?' he said drowsily, when Langley roused him.

'Already? I have been gone nearly three hours. You thought my conduct strange, I suppose?'

'Very.'

On this Langley explained as much as was necessary for Meach's enlightenment, and informed him of his

resolve to proceed at once to the capture of Limbery Hicks, with a view to his hanging.

'I shall go with you,' said Meach. 'I should like to see the scallywag well hanged.'

Langley demurred.

'You are a family man and my guest,' quoth he. 'There is almost sure to be some lively shooting, and if you were to get hurt I should never forgive myself. No, I cannot allow it.'

'There is sense in that,' returned Meach reflectively. 'I am not quite as young as I used to be, and when a man has a wife and seven children— Anyhow, let me go with you. I need not run into danger—in fact, I promise you I won't. I will wait at a distance while you are bearding the lion in his den.'

'Very well, on that condition I consent, and I shall be pleased to have your company. Now, this enterprise will take money, and I have very little left. Would it suit you to give me some of your five-dollar gold pieces for my draft on Berners Brothers at sixty days' sight ?

The proposal not only suited Mr. Meach, but relieved him of a serious responsibility—the custody of his coin—and as he bought the draft at a rate of exchange which left an ample margin for contingencies, he enjoyed the satisfaction of obliging his friend and doing a good stroke of business at the same time.

Langley found the four men whom he wanted among his convalescents. They had been cured of their wounds, but, their regiments having vanished into space, were quite willing to earn a hundred dollars (in gold) apiece by taking part in the expedition for the capture of Colonel Dark.

There was some trouble about horses, which, owing

to recent military requisitions, were exceedingly scarce ; but the difficulty yielded to money and fair words, and the seven men, well armed, and carrying each four days' rations, set out the same night by the light of the moon.

Sergeant Breeze advised that they should do most of their marching after sunset and before sunrise. They were going into a district where Unionist troops were more likely to be met with than in the region round Auburn, and an armed party of nondescripts falling in with a patrol, or meeting a regiment on the march, might be roughly handled—in certain contingencies treated as outlaws, possibly as spies.

The advice was followed. It commended itself to Langley's judgment, and he had made up his mind that the best way to secure the sergeant's allegiance was to trust him ; for though he would rather not have trusted a man who had deserted from three armies in succession, and been hand and glove with Colonel Dark, he had no choice, short of abandoning the quest—an alternative which did not so much as occur to him.

On the other hand, he firmly believed that Breeze meant to be true—if for no other reason, because Langley had given him only two hundred and fifty dollars of the promised reward, and stipulated the balance was not to be paid until it had been earned. Moreover, he knew that if he should join the Colonel, and be found by the Yankees in his company, he and his chief would be extremely likely to be hanged on the same tree.

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CHAPTER XLI.

FAST AND LOOSE.

ON the evening of the third day after leaving Auburn the seven amateur policemen — trackers they called themselves — reached a point, according to Breeze's estimate, four or five miles from the Old Mine. It being essential to the success of the enterprise that Colonel Dark should get no wind of their approach, they halted here for the night, choosing for their bivouac a spot where grass and water were abundant, and so far from the road that they were not likely to be observed by passing wayfarers.

After eating a frugal supper of sardines and biscuits, washed down with corn juice and water, Langley, Meach, and the sergeant lighted their cigars and talked over their plans.

The first essential was to find out whether Dark had taken up his abode at the Old Mine, whom he had with him, and what sort of a watch was kept.

'We shall have to prospect,' observed Meach.

'Exactly,' said Langley; 'but when? We cannot reconnoitre to any purpose before morning, and as I want to take Dark alive, we shall have to wait here until to-morrow night. We could not ride up there

by daylight without the risk—I might almost say the
safety—of being seen before we reached the place,
and so enabling Dark to prepare for an obstinate defence,
if he has anybody with him besides Soto, or to give us
the slip if he has not. On the other hand, delays are
dangerous. If we hang about here all to-morrow, some-
body may see us—perhaps one of the Colonel's own
boys.'

'That's true,' quoth Breeze; 'seven men and as
many horses cannot creep underground, or hide in an
oak-tree, like King Charles. Is there no other way?
I have it—yes, I think that will do. I'll go there to-
night—ride square up to the house. If there's nobody
in, well and good—I'll come right back. If I find the
Colonel at home, I shall play the part of faithful follower,
and offer him my services. The least he can do in
return will be to offer me quarters, in which case I
should slip quietly away in the night, come here and
make my report. You would return with me right
away, surround the house, and lag the Colonel before
he knew where he was.'

'Ingenious, but I fear neither practical nor prudent,'
said Langley, after two or three minutes' thought. 'I
know Dark of old. He is cuteness itself, and as wary
as an Indian on the war-path. He is also quick at
making deductions. The moment he set eyes on you
he would know that you came straight from my house,
and guess that you came on no friendly errand.'

'Excuse me, doctor, but I don't quite see that,' in-
terrupted Breeze. 'Why should he suppose that my
errand was not friendly, and that I came from your
house?'

'Because he gave you an appointment there, and you

could not well call without learning that he was gone. He would infer, further, that you had followed him to get money from him, and guess that, as you had called at my house, you had seen me, and probably heard about the stolen dollars, and told me where you thought he might be found. This would be quite enough for Hic—I mean for Dark. When he suspects he acts. In my opinion, his greeting would be a bullet from his six-shooter; and even though he gave you quarters, he would take good care that you neither slipped away during the night nor the next day.'

Langley had another reason for objecting to Breeze's proposal. He believed the man meant to be loyal; but if he placed himself in Dark's power he might have to choose between treason and death, in which case Langley was by no means sure that the sergeant would elect for the less agreeable alternative.

'Anyhow, it is too great a risk,' continued Langley, 'and I have thought of something better and simpler, besides being a good deal safer. We will prospect—you and I—in the morning. You know the way to the Old Mine, I suppose?'

'Quite well. I have a good eye for country. When I have been to a place once, I can always find my way there again. You turn from the main road at a point about two miles north of this. I could almost go there blindfolded.'

'I am glad to hear that, for we shall start an hour before sunrise—the better to avoid observation—and get to the neighbourhood of the Old Mine before Dark and his people—if he is there—are astir.'

The next thing to decide was whether the scouts should walk or ride. Breeze thought they had better

ride part of the way, so that their horses might be at hand in case of need ; but Langley decided that they should walk, and, in order to be ready for whatever emergency might befall, gave orders for the main body to leave the encampment three hours after Breeze and himself started, and wait for them where the track to the Old Mine branched off from the highroad.

These matters being settled, the trackers laid them down to rest, and slept the sleep of the just, until they were roused by the old soldier who had been appointed to keep watch over the camp.

At four o'clock Langley and the sergeant set out on their reconnoitring expedition, accompanied as far as the track to the Old Mine by Gibson (one of the men), in order that there might be no mistake as to the point where himself and the others were to await their leader's return.

The road was furrowed with ruts and deeply dented with hoofs, from which Langley concluded that it had recently been traversed by troops—an inference which was confirmed by the silent farmsteads and deserted houses which they occasionally passed.

An hour's tramp brought the three men to the cross-roads which had been agreed upon as the rendezvous. Gibson, having well marked the spot, hied him back to the camp, and Langley and Breeze continued their journey.

The track to the mine zigzagged upwards, and ran along the edge of a steep ravine bordered with trees. At the best little more than a bridle-path, some sections of the road were so weather and water worn as to render its ascent arduous for bipeds and difficult for horses. Nevertheless, Langley and Breeze presently

perceived that it had been ascended by horses, as the comparatively fresh hoof-marks showed, not more than twenty-four hours previously—perhaps less.

'There is somebody at the mine. This track leads nowhere else,' observed Breeze.

'We must find another way, then,' said Langley. 'If we follow the trail, we shall either meet enemies or be seen before we reach the mine.'

'Not at this time of day. We need not take to the wood for another half-hour.'

'I am not so sure about that. It begins to look as though Dark and a few others are up here, and we cannot be too cautious. Better take to the wood right away.'

Which they did, with the result that, albeit the prospectors thereby rendered themselves invisible from the track, the density of the vegetation and the steepness of the hillside greatly impeded their progress, and by the time they reached their objective point the sun was fully risen. Hence it was necessary to proceed with more caution than ever, and to see without being seen.

Creeping stealthily, like an Indian brave intent on surprising an enemy, and closely followed by Langley, Breeze led the way to a 'coign of vantage' which commanded a view of the place where Dark was supposed to have taken up his abode. They were on a high, steep bank that rose almost sheer from a small clearing, once cultivated by the miners, whose log huts, for the most part roofless, still remained. And there were other buildings—a barn, a stable, and a frame house, which had probably been occupied by the manager. Hard by was one of the mines, which had been driven at right angles into the hillside.

All this was distinctly beheld by Breeze, less distinctly by Langley, who was behind him, peering over his shoulder.

'You don't see very well,' whispered Breeze. 'Here, take my place. By grasping this branch, and leaning well forward, you will be able to see all that is going on.'

Whereupon they exchanged places, and Langley contemplated the scene at his leisure.

Down below him, and so near that he could almost have dropped on the roof, was the frame house, from one of whose chimneys curled a line of blue smoke, which showed that Dark's people—if they were his people—were getting breakfast ready.

Presently three rough-looking fellows came out of the house in their shirt-sleeves, each with a cigar in his mouth; then a fourth, in whom Langley recognised Soto.

If he were right in this conjecture, Dark could not be far off.

Craning eagerly over the ledge to get a better view, Langley bore too heavily on his support. The branch snapped, and he rolled down the bank with a great clatter. The bushes broke his fall somewhat, but he reached the bottom quite breathless and more than half stunned.

Before he could recover himself, or even rise to his feet, the four men, uttering loud exclamations, were upon him, and he was captured and disarmed without a struggle.

'What the devil is all this row about?' cried a voice Langley well knew, and the next moment he was face to face with the man he had meant to hang.

'Oh, it is you, Rufus Junius! This is a pleasure I

did not expect,' said Hicks ironically. 'A visit from you is an honour indeed. But how did you get here? and why all this excitement and clamour?'

'He came tumbling down the bank, and thinking he was either an enemy or a spy, we laid hold of him,' answered Soto.

'Oh no! Dr. Langley could never stoop so low as to be a spy; and as for being an enemy, didn't he entertain us hospitably, and lend me a thousand dollars in gold before we parted? I suppose you found the receipt, sonny?'

'Shall we loose him, then, Colonel?' asked Soto.

'Well, I think not. He is a friend whom I should be so sorry to lose that I mean to make sure of him. Fetch a cord, one of you, and tie his hands behind him.'

The cord was brought. Langley, wild with rage at falling by his own fault into the toils, resisted desperately; but the odds against him were too great, and after a short struggle he was securely pinioned.

'Bring him inside the house,' said Hicks to his men, who obeyed the order by taking their prisoner into a room, the furniture of which consisted of a rough table resting on trestles and a couple of equally rough and similarly fashioned benches.

'Now leave us,' ordered Hicks.

Then to Langley, mockingly:

'Won't you sit down, doctor? I am sorry I cannot offer you more suitable accommodation, but the next time you favour me with a visit I hope to be better prepared.'

Langley made no answer. He was busied with his own thoughts, which were none of the pleasantest.

Instead of taking Hicks, Hicks had taken him. He was in the power of a miscreant who owed him a grudge, with whom killing in cold blood was merely a detail, and who had no sense of justice or feeling of compassion to which he might appeal; and he would rather perish than crave mercy from a man who had done him so foul a wrong, and whom he hated and despised. His first impulse had been to preserve a dignified silence, or answer Hicks with words of scorn and defy him to do his worst. But that would merely have precipitated a crisis and hastened his doom, and there was still a possibility of turning the tables. Breeze had witnessed his capture, and would, he felt sure, return to his companions and bring them to the rescue.

In these circumstances Langley's policy—nay, his only chance—was rather to mark time by keeping his captor in conversation than to excite him to immediate action, either by hot words or obstinate silence.

'Don't be down on your luck, sonny. It is only the fortune of war,' said Dark, after a short pause; 'or is it sulky you are?'

'I am neither down on my luck nor sulky,' returned Langley quietly; 'but why these bonds? This is not the sort of treatment I gave you when you came to me wounded and a fugitive.'

'The cases are not analogous, Rufus Junius. You did not treat me kindly because you loved me. You even said that had you known who I was you would have refused me shelter. So for that service I owe you scant thanks. Moreover, you did not come to me wounded and a fugitive. I am afraid you came to spy out the nakedness of the land. How did you guess my whereabouts? . . . You need not say unless you

like. I know: you learned it from Breeze, who no doubt called at your house after I left. You corrupted him and he betrayed me. With what object? I can guess that, too. You thought to catch me napping and alone, and take your revenge for certain fancied injuries.'

This was too much for Langley.

'Fancied injuries!' he exclaimed. 'You stole my money and murdered my wife. Do you call these fancied injuries?'

Hicks started with surprise, but quickly recovering himself, smiled sardonically.

'So you think I killed your wife. Would you mind telling me how you conceived so absurd a notion? It would be interesting to know. . . . But wait a minute. Here comes Soto with my breakfast. Will you join me?'

'How can I?'

'I beg your pardon; I forgot your hands were tied up. We will soon put that right. Another length of cord, Soto.'

When the cord was brought, Hicks asked Langley to sit on the bench, and after fastening his legs together, loosed his hands.

'Now you can eat,' he said; 'but'—taking a revolver from his hip pocket and placing it within his reach and out of Langley's—'if you try to play any tricks with your knife and fork, I shall be under the painful necessity of terminating your earthly career without further notice. . . . Let me help you to one of these venison cutlets. They are done to a turn.'

Langley had no great appetite, and was inwardly raging, yet kept outwardly calm, and made a show of eating. Hicks, on the other hand, ate heartily, and

until he was through with his breakfast made no attempt to resume the interrupted conversation.

'Now for a smoke,' he said at length, pushing his plate aside and producing cigars, one of which he gave to Langley—'now for a smoke and a little more talk, if you have no objection. I am anxious to know on what grounds you bring against me this very serious charge of shooting your wife. You may speak out; I shall not take offence.'

To this invitation Langley responded by setting forth in detail the grounds on which he had come to the conclusion in question.

'So it was Mr. Meach and the knife that did the business,' said Hicks thoughtfully. 'I always had a weakness for curios, yet that was no reason why—'

'You admit it, then?' interrupted Langley, with eagerness.

'Would you believe me if I denied it?' queried Hicks.

'No.'

'In that case, I do not see what I have to gain by denial—not even your good opinion.'

'My good opinion! Now that you virtually acknowledge your guilt, would you mind telling me why you committed—why you killed my poor wife? You could have had no grudge against her.'

'I had, though, against her husband, who played me a dirty trick in the matter of those Peruvian bonds, and, as you know, sonny, I never forgive an injury. Also, I thought it would be a sweeter and more subtle revenge to shoot her than to shoot you. And I had another motive. Cannot you guess it?'

'No.'

'No? You used not to be so dense, Junius. Well, I will try to enlighten you. I wanted your active help in our scheme for—relieving the Bank of England of a little of its superfluous wealth. But, so long as you were the husband of a rich wife, and under her influence, I feared you might make difficulties, so I removed the wife. True, you made difficulties all the same, and were worse to manage than I expected; but had Mrs. Langley lived, I might not have been able to manage you at all. Anyhow, I had my revenge. Admit, now, I had my revenge. Had, did I say? I am having it now!'

Dark's face, as he made this cruel taunt, looked so evil that it was all Langley could do to refrain from leaning over the table and taking him by the throat, despite his own helplessness and the loaded revolver at Dark's elbow.

'And it is my turn again. It was yours the other day, when you had me at your mercy, and saved my life only that you might flout and revile me, pose as a reformed rake and a superior person, and treat me as though I were not worthy to touch the hem of your garment. Yes, it is my turn now, and—— But no; I shall not decide your fate on my own motion. I will consult the boys. Soto!'

When the Mexican responded to the call, his master bade him keep an eye on the prisoner, and if he attempted to escape, send a bullet through his head.

Then he went outside, and after an absence of some ten minutes, returned, his eyes gleaming with ferocious triumph.

'The boys have condemned you to death, Rufus,' he said—'the death of a spy, which means that you are to be hanged. I should have preferred a military

execution, but, being in a minority of one, I was bound to yield.'

Langley had anticipated from the first that Hicks meant to have his life, but he still hoped that Breeze and the others would arrive in time to save it.

'When?' he asked.

'Now. Right away.'

'Won't you let me write a few lines of farewell to my daughter?'

'Well, I think you may do that, on condition that you allow me to read your letter before I mail it.'

'I agree,' answered Langley, who had made the request merely to obtain a short respite. 'Just one more question. How about Sarasta's letter?'

'You need not trouble yourself about that, sonny. I merely wanted to put you in a good humour, with a view to obtaining that trifling pecuniary accommodation which you so unkindly refused me. I did meet Sarasta, and learnt from him that Juanita was dead; but the letter was a pure invention. You half believed it, though. Get on with your one. How long will it take you?'

'Half an hour.'

'I will give you twenty minutes. Can you find the doctor some paper, Soto?'

'I cannot, Colonel. We have not a scrap of writing-paper amongst us, nor yet a pen.'

'I have paper in my pocket, and a pencil,' said Langley; 'that will be enough for my purpose.'

Then he wrote something—he hardly knew what—and went on writing, until Hicks told him that time was up.

'I will mail it for you,' he added, taking the scrawl from Langley and putting it in his pocket. 'Care of Berners Brothers, I suppose?'

Langley nodded assent, whereupon Hicks summoned two of his men, who, after again binding the victim's arms, untied his legs and led him forth.

'That is the tree,' said Hicks, pointing to a live oak hard by. 'The lowest of those branches is just the thing. The rope, men!'

Langley, looking round with intense anxiety, perceived a slight movement in the bushes at the top of the bank, and the next moment two almost simultaneous reports rang out, and Soto and another of the outlaws rolled at his feet. A third shot settled yet another, and before the remainder had time to recover from their consternation, Meach and two of the trackers rushed from the ravine, and began firing their revolvers right and left.

Then followed a regular *sauve qui peut*. True, the outlaws outnumbered their opponents; but as most of them had left their weapons in the house, there was nothing for it but to run, and they bolted like rabbits for the nearest cover, their leader with them.

Langley, who had been loosed by Breeze, fearing that his enemy might escape, ran to intercept him, and was laying his hand on the arch-scoundrel's shoulder, when Hicks whipped out his revolver and fired at his pursuer point-blank; but Langley, heedless of the wound, seized Hicks by the throat, and after a short struggle they both fell, Langley uppermost.

At this juncture Meach and Breeze came up, and the latter gave Hicks a blow on the head that half stunned him.

'Bind him,' said Langley faintly.

Which was done promptly and effectively.

'I am afraid you are hurt,' said Meach anxiously.

'Shot through the lungs. See!' said Langley, showing him a blood-stained pocket-handkerchief which he had just removed from his mouth.

'Good God! Not so bad as that, I hope. Let me help you into the house. But let us first make an end of this murderer. Run him up, right away, boys. Hang him with the rope he meant for the doctor.'

As the men adjusted the cord round his neck, Hicks cursed them fiercely. Then he grew quieter.

'I am done for at last,' he said, with a sardonic laugh. 'Well, I have had a good time, and you won't be long after me, Rufus Junius. You had better have let me go quietly. But you always were a fool——'

'Quick, run the ruffian up!' cried Meach excitedly. 'Quick, boys!'

The boys obeyed with a will, and the next moment the dead body of Limbery Hicks was swinging from the very branch on which he had proposed to hang his former comrade.

When the lynching was done, the victors sought long and diligently for the plunder, which Dark was supposed to have hidden in the neighbourhood.

But the quest proved bootless. The Old Man was too deep to lay up treasure where it could be found by any other than himself.

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CHAPTER XLII.

A CONFESSION.

IN the meanwhile Meach and Breeze helped Langley into the house, and made him as comfortable as the scanty resources at their command permitted. The wounded man, albeit faint and suffering, retained both his consciousness and self-possession. After being placed in one of the hammocks left by the outlaws, he signified to Breeze that he had something to say to Meach, and the sergeant withdrew.

'Can we do anything more for you?' asked Meach.
'A drop of whisky?'

'If you please. It will perhaps help me to say what I have to say, and I must say it quickly, for I have not long to live.'

'Oh, don't talk in that way! You will pull through, never fear!'

'I wish I could think so, Meach. But I know better. I am bleeding internally, and doubt whether I shall survive more than an hour. I want you to do something for me.'

'I will do anything, and gladly. All the same, I hope——'

'You are very good, and I thank you with all my

heart. I want you to write to my brother-in-law, Richard Berners, at Liverpool. But I must write a few lines myself, before my strength fails.'

Taking from one of his pockets a pencil, and from another several letters, Langley wrote at the end of one of them, with some pain and difficulty, as follows :

' MY DARLING,

' Before this comes into your hands, Mr. Meach or your uncle will have told you what has happened to me. With my last breath I pray God to bless you and make you a happy and useful woman; and I beseech you not to delay your marriage a single day on account of my death. It is an unspeakable satisfaction to me to know that you will be happily married to a good man, the man of your choice. Give my love to your future husband, and the same to our dear friend, Skipworth. I would that I could see you again. But God's will be done: I have received better at His hands than I deserved. I cannot write more. Mr. Meach has been very kind. Again I pray God to bless you, my own, my dear Irene, and until death do us part I shall remain your loving father,

' R. J. L.'

' You can read what I have written,' said Langley to Meach when he had finished. ' These three letters were put into my hand shortly before we left Auburn. One is from my daughter, announcing her engagement to Lord Dudbrook, a fine young fellow, whose acquaintance I made a few months ago. Another is from her lover asking for my approval. The third is from his uncle, and my friend, Skipworth, of whom you have

heard me speak. I want you to be good enough to forward them to Richard Berners and write to him——'

'I will do better than that. I shall give them to him and tell him—whatever you would like me to tell him.'

'What?'

'I mean that I shall start for Europe inside of a month and see Berners and your daughter.'

'But this is too much. I could not think——'

'Don't let that trouble you. I was thinking of going anyhow. The war will be over by the time I get to Liverpool, and we shall have a big boom in business, you bet. If I don't make ten thousand dollars out of the trip, my name isn't James T. Meach.'

'Thank you—thank you very much, Meach. You are a true friend.'

'Besides, seeing that I was the means of introducing that scoundrel to you, it is the least I can do,' added Meach.

'You were not. I knew him before I knew you, unfortunately. The introduction was merely a blind—on his part. I see you are surprised, and you will be still more so before I am through. I have a confession to make, which I want you to convey to Richard Berners. . . . I have not been a good man, Meach, and I am only reaping as I have sowed. I lost my father when I was young, and had an unfortunate upbringing. I was exposed to evil influences, to which, by reason of my youth, temperament, and other circumstances, I succumbed only too readily. I have been a scalp-hunter and an outlaw on the Mexican frontier. You know what that means. There I met Hicks, who beguiled me into becoming his accomplice in a great

fraud, and so got me into his power. Then he tried to entangle me in another swindle, but I dropped both it and him and married Ida Berners—married her under false pretences, in that I kept both her and her relatives in the dark as to my antecedents, albeit Richard was far from satisfied; and what afterwards befell must have confirmed his misgivings. . . . You know some of the particulars of my wife's murder, but I did not tell you of a feeling I had that, in some mysterious way, I was its cause. This suspicion has haunted my mind ever since, and I know now that it was well founded. Only an hour ago Hicks admitted that he deliberately killed her, partly to revenge my separation from him, partly because he thought her removal would the better enable him to entangle me in yet another swindle. In that he was mistaken. I would have no hand in it. Yet I did almost as bad. I held my peace, and stood by with folded arms when I ought to have defeated his scheme by delivering him to justice. I feared for myself, for I knew that if I denounced him he would reveal my evil past. That also is a sorrowful memory. It has embittered my subsequent life, and never have I rued it so bitterly as now. After that I tried to do better, tried hard and earnestly. Once I went wrong, and once I had a narrow escape from perdition; but my life at Auburn has been without reproach, and I have striven to be of some use to my fellow-men. If I could only have forgotten I should have been happy. But the dark past was never long absent from my thoughts, and now, oh God! I would give worlds—worlds.'

'Anyhow, your fellow-citizens think very highly of you, and you have done your level best to make amends,' observed Meach soothingly.

'Very poor amends, Meach. But I must not complain. I only reap as I sowed; and my punishment has been less than my deserts. You will tell all this to my brother-in-law, Meach. Say I crave his forgiveness for the great wrong I did him and his sister, who loved me, and was of so noble a nature that I believe she would have loved me, even though she had known the worst. But I could not tell her; I would rather have perished. Poor Ida! But not Irene. Charge him not to tell Irene. It would darken her young life and serve no useful purpose. Be sure of this, Meach; make it a condition.'

'Unless he gives me his word, I will not tell him a thing—not a thing,' said Meach emphatically.

Langley was growing paler, and every now and then he wiped from his mouth the blood which was continually welling up from his wounded lung. After a short pause, apparently spent in painful thought, he went on:

'It is perhaps as well for Irene that this has happened. Hicks has got his due; Juanita is dead; and when I am gone the past will be buried in oblivion. Nobody will have any interest in raking it up, and, please God, my sins will not rise up in judgment against my child.'

'I don't think you need have any fears on that score,' put in Meach. 'But who is Juanita?—I never heard of her before.'

'A woman with whom I went through a form of marriage in Mexico—long ago, before you knew me.'

'A frontier marriage, I understand. Was she a squaw?'

'No; of pure Spanish descent and well connected. You must think very ill of me, Meach?'

'Well, from what you say, you have not been exactly a saint, that's a fact. But when a man turns from his evil ways and repents, and becomes a good citizen and father, much may be forgiven him. And I should not cast a stone at you, even though you had not saved my life. I have considerable to repent of myself, and I should be very sorry to reap as I have sown, either in this world or the next. I guess we are all let off easier than we deserve, and if I had been in your place I doubt whether I should have behaved better than you—or so well.'

'So you still remain my friend?'

'Of course. Why not? Didn't you render me a great service? Besides, I know you only as Dr. Langley, the good physician; that's what they call you at Auburn.'

'Do they?' said Langley, with a faint smile. 'Then my life has not been wholly wasted; my memory will be honoured in the place where I have dwelt the longest. Tell this to Richard Berners. Give me your hand, Meach; my time grows short. Isn't it getting dark?'

'I think not. The sun is shining.'

'Then it is the darkness of death. Thank you for all your kindness, dear friend. . . . Irene will be very sorry, poor child! but tell her from me not to grieve overmuch. . . . If I could only have seen her once again! . . . And her mother died for me! A mis-spent life, all save a few years, is a fearful thing when you come to die, Meach. . . . God be merciful to me, a sinner! . . . It is nearly dark. . . . Shall we go out for a drive, Ida, the last before we leave? . . . The knife, the knife, *Guerra al Cuchillo!* . . . I should like to be a doctor, father. . . . The Apaches are on the war-path. Boot and saddle, boys, boot and

saddle! . . . I am not your husband, Juanita. . . .
Forgive me, Ida.'

These were Langley's last words, spoken in an almost inaudible whisper. Meach, who was deeply moved, wiped the tears from his eyes, and, looking down, saw that those of his friend were fixed in death.

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CHAPTER XLIII.

HIGHLY PROVIDENTIAL.

ROMAINE played his part well. When he had got the thin edge of the wedge in, he drove it home with characteristic energy. As a clerk he had been useful; as a partner he made himself indispensable. Moreover, circumstances favoured him. As the head of the firm aged he grew physically heavier and mentally less alert. Gout laid him by the heels, and his attendance at the office became intermittent and irregular. The reins gradually slipped from his fingers, and were taken up by his junior, who, relaxing nothing of his activity, conducted the business with undeniable skill and success.

It was a great grief to Mr. Berners to be constrained to take a back-seat, and a still greater that his sons (whom he had brought up on unlimited pocket-money) were not shaping according to his hopes. Not one of them showed any business aptitude whatever. The eldest went into the army, the second into the Church, the third and youngest to the devil. On the other hand, Romaine's two sons (who had not been brought up on unlimited pocket-money) were taking an active part in the business, and Mr. Berners foresaw that,

though the old name might outlive the century, Romaine and his sons were the destined proprietors of the business which the Berners had founded and built up.

Yet he was not without his consolations. He was very rich and highly respected; it had been intimated to him that he might hope to receive, ere long, the honour of a baronetcy; his daughters had married into county families, and his niece was engaged to the future Earl of Mountfitchet. It was to consult his partner about her, or rather her late father, and the startling story which he had just heard from Meach, that he was come down to the office. He felt that he must relieve his mind by talking to somebody; and as Romaine knew so much already, and could keep a secret, he naturally chose him as the recipient of his confidences.

'I am not much surprised,' said Romaine, when he, too, had heard the story. 'I had never a very high opinion of Langley. Indeed, I may say that I thought him a bad egg from the first.'

Though the ex-clerk still treated his chief with marked respect, he no longer, as had been his wont in days gone by, addressed him with bated breath, and he had acquired the self-assured and slightly dogmatic manner which so often characterizes self-made men.

'Well, I did not like the connection; but my sister took the bit between her teeth, and when a woman wills, she will, you may depend on't. Besides, I knew nothing against the man—knew nothing about him, in fact. Cordelia was right, after all. She distrusted him from the outset.'

Romaine smiled complacently; he, too, had proved to be right; it pleased him to think that he had been sharp enough to turn his distrust of Langley to so good

account, and that the seed he had sown was producing so rich a harvest.

'I suppose you will agree with me now,' says he, 'that Hicks and David D. Dundas, who stuck us with those bogus bonds, were one and the same?'

'It certainly looks so. Do you suppose that Langley took any part in that business?'

'I haven't the least doubt of it, though probably a subordinate part; and I gather from what Meach told you that, when Langley came to us with that letter of introduction from Gubbins and Murk, he was bent on a similar errand.'

'But he renounced it. Give him credit for that.'

'He renounced it because it paid him better to marry Miss Ida.'

'Perhaps. All the same, he made her a good husband, and Meach says that nothing could be more honourable than his record at Auburn.'

'That was because, being well off, he had no inducement to be otherwise.'

'There I don't agree with you, Romaine,' said Mr. Berners, with some asperity. 'He proved his sincerity by the resolute way in which he hunted down Hicks; and the confession he made to Meach shows that his repentance was genuine.'

'Well, there is perhaps something in that,' observed Romaine coldly. 'But you cannot deny that he was a reprobate?'

'At one time of his life, certainly; but when a reprobate turns from his evil ways and repents, we should not be too hard on him. I know that if my unhappy boy were to do so I should receive him with open arms. Langley asked for my forgiveness with his

dying breath, and I forgive him, though his marriage with my poor sister was positively wicked, and, as we know now, led to her death. Besides, it is my duty. If I refuse to forgive others, how can I expect to be forgiven myself? We are all sinners, more or less, Romaine.'

This being a sentiment which Mr. Romaine, as an orthodox Churchman, could not gainsay, he answered, 'Of course.'

'I forgive him all the more freely and willingly,' Mr. Berners went on, 'that I regard his removal at this juncture as highly providential. He meant to come to the wedding. I confess that rather alarmed me. Knowing what I did, though so much less than I know now, and remembering what worries and alarms we had when Langley was here before, I feared something untoward might happen. Now I don't see how anything can, especially as Hicks and that Spanish woman are dead. There is only that gipsy fellow, Stanley, and nobody would believe him—though if by any chance he were to see Miss Langley and proclaim himself her father's friend we should have trouble.'

'There is no fear of that: Sol is doing time for killing a keeper.'

'So we are quite safe. And there is another consideration. A man of Langley's antecedents was not a desirable father-in-law for the future Earl of Mountfitchet. Suppose some of his old associates had recognised him while he was in his lordship's company?' exclaimed Mr. Berners with unaffected horror.

'Then you don't propose to say aught of this to Lord Dudbrook,' inquired Romaine maliciously, albeit with seeming solicitude.

'Heaven forbid! Nor to Irene, by her father's express desire. What would be the good? Besides, if Lord Dudbrook knew all, he might want to back out, or Irene, with her high-flown notions, might think it her duty to break off the match. We have informed her of her father's death—of course—but no more, not even that Hicks was her mother's murderer. She is quite broken-hearted, poor girl! she doted on her father, and thought him the best of men. But she is young, and will soon get over her sorrow; and, as the marriage is not to be deferred, also by her father's desire—though it must, of course, be very quiet and that—Irene will be too busy to brood, and Lord Dudbrook is coming to console her. A splendid match for the girl, and, Gad! not a bad one for him. She will have six thousand a year.'

THE END.

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